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The GREY KNIGHT

Mrs. HENRY DE LA PASTURE

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THE GREY KNIGHT

BY
MRS. HENRY DE LA PASTURE

Author of "Peter's Mother," "The Lonely Lady of
Grosvenor Square," "Deborah of Tod's,"
"Catherine of Calais," etc.

Never say
Alack for the years that are left behind.
Look you keep love when your dreams decay.
All else flits past on the wings of the wind.
John Payne.



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THE GREY KNIGHT

CHAPTER I

A WOMAN rested upon a bench placed beneath a gaily striped awning, in the front court of a small French provincial hotel.

The April sunshine flooded the roughly plastered, yellow-washed walls, the high slated roof, and the closed green shutters of the numerous windows.

On either side of her extended a row of pollarded limes, guarding the little enclosure from the steep white road, whereon a peasant was driving a donkey laden with sacks of grain.

The fields were glowing with buttercups, and the crickets sang loudly and incessantly.

Above the deep and narrow ravine in which the hotel was built, rose the white-capped mountains of the Pyrenees, against a dazzling turquoise sky.

The woman leant back in the shade of the awning, and gazed upwards at the bright blue shadows of the snow peaks on the heights, and down to the golden showers of laburnum and the abundance of white lilac which flowered in the garden of the little hotel. Spring and summer seemed to meet in the perfection of the still cloudless morning. She

closed her eyes as though the beauty overcame her, and a tear forced its way through the long black lashes which rested upon her pale cheek.

She was no longer in her first youth, but her face arrested attention no less on account of its purity of outline than for its exceeding purity of colour.

Her rather coarse, plentiful black hair was strained unbecomingly from a low broad forehead; the great dark eyes beneath straight delicate brows were soft and gentle in expression. The lines of her tall figure were singularly graceful; for even an ill-made black gown could not disguise the beautiful curve of her bosom, nor the slenderness of her long waist. Her white and shapely hands lay idly, palm uppermost, in her lap.

The main entrance to the hotel was shaded by a jutting balcony; on the steps two old ladies chattered eagerly to each other in whispers, glancing over their shoulders towards the bench whereon she appeared to be sleeping.

They were both of a type commonly represented in out-of-the-way hotels and *pensions*, and belonged to that company of lonely thrifty English widows and spinsters who travel in search of change and cheapness, and who appear to be endlessly engaged in telling each other stories, and knitting each other shawls.

"I can tell you all about her. You see *I* have been here for ages. I found out everything months ago from a lady doctor who was staying here when it happened. She is a Mrs. Owen, and her husband was sent here last October for his health. Quite the wrong place, my informant said. He had been an invalid for years, *locomotor ataxy*, I think she

called it; anyway a kind of spinal disease, and he suddenly developed acute phthisis and died of pleurisy almost directly after his arrival. His mother and sister were with him too, and the shock nearly killed the old lady. She has been laid up here all the winter, but I hear she is better, so they will be going away at last."

"I thought she was a widow," said the newcomer, looking at the motionless figure in black with compassionate interest. "I suppose she has never got over it. She looks so sad. Do you think it would cheer her up if I went and talked to her a little?"

"It would be of no use to try," said the other, shaking her head. "I have made advances more than once, as you may suppose, having been here with them so long. She only smiles and answers yes or no; and gets away as soon as she can. They have never been abroad before, it seems, so have no idea of making themselves agreeable to their fellow-travellers. So insular!"

"How extraordinary!" said the newcomer, and they both smiled, conscious of their own superiority in this respect.

"They keep themselves to themselves, and yet I cannot find out that they have any particular connections to boast of," said the elder of the two ladies, almost mournfully. "They are certainly very badly off, and I am almost sure the young widow is entirely dependent on the other two, for she seems to have no will of her own."

"She does not look the least like an Englishwoman, poor thing—except for her dress," said the other, with unconscious satire.

"Her mother was a Frenchwoman, so much I

did manage to extract," said her informant eagerly, "for I heard the sister-in-law call her Louise. She was the daughter of old Mrs. Owen's brother; so she must have married her own first cousin. Luckily there are no children."

"She looks much more Spanish or Italian than French," objected the newcomer, nodding and smiling as the subject of their discussion suddenly opened her eyes and perceived them. "There! you see when she smiles! Such very red lips and that row of perfectly even white teeth, for all the world like a Neapolitan fisher boy."

"Probably South of France," said the old lady with a careless air of wisdom. "I know the face well. In those parts it is a very common one—among the peasantry."

"I should call her the *contadina* type, cast in such a very large mould," said the other, determined to prove herself no whit behind her compatriot in experience. "That black hair and those curiously straight features." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Such a very fully developed figure is too remarkable to be pretty in an English lady—don't you think?"

"Oh much—*much*. Too *prononcé* altogether," said her friend, emphatically. "There is the bell for the *déjeuner* at last."

Fellow-travellers are interesting even when of a peasant type, but luncheon is more interesting still, and with calm though kind superiority, these two little withered unlovely elderly English ladies turned their backs upon womanhood at its zenith, as represented by Louise, and hastened up the steps of the hotel.

As they disappeared through the doorway, their place was taken by a tall thin spinster who vouchsafed them an awkward salutation in passing.

Louise rose slowly from the bench whereon she had been resting, and moved across the sunlit space to join her sister-in-law.

"How is Aunt Emma now, Anna?"

"I don't like her looks at all. But she's quite made up her mind to go to-morrow, so there's an end of it," said Miss Owen grimly. "You know what mother is. It's no use thwarting her. She thinks she knows best, and as she's thought so for seventy-five years, I suppose she'll go on thinking so to the end of time."

She led the way into the dining-room, already filled with the visitors stopping at the hotel, who were seated round a number of little tables.

The Béarnaise *bonnes* clattered over the boarded floor, and the proprietor of the hotel, invisible but audible, stood behind a screen and superintended the distribution of the courses.

The sisters-in-law established themselves in their corner, and were helped to *œufs sur le plat*, and to the *vin ordinaire* which held its place as a matter of course next the cruet in the middle of the white cloth.

"There are asparagus to-day. I must say they do us very well for the money," said Anna, with a slight awakening of interest, "sick as I am of the whole place and of every one in it."

"*Prenez-en, Madame,*" whispered the good-natured waitress, with a special and friendly nudge for Louise, "*il y en a trop ce matin.*"

Louise looked up and smiled, and the Béarnaise

smiled back, with a protecting and encouraging expression.

"The girl is getting very familiar," said Anna, "but as we are going away so soon it matters the less."

"We must give her a present," said Louise, anxiously. "She has been so good all this time."

"Mother has put her down among the expenses. She is going to give her five francs."

"It is n't much," said Louise, sighing. "I wonder——"

"It's as much as we can afford. If you want to do more you could give her one of your coloured dresses; your blue serge, for instance."

"That is very old," said Louise. "I might give her my red merino——"

"I thought that would do for me," said Anna, hastily. "It could be taken in to fit me."

"Anna—it is *red*."

"I shall be out of mourning long before you are," said Anna, looking the other way.

Louise was silent.

A sour, pinched tartan-clad, smartly-belted Frenchwoman regarded them impatiently over her copy of *Le Matin*, tapping her high-heeled shoes on the boards; for the *bonne* carried all the dishes first to Louise, and this offended her, though it was strictly in accordance with the rules of the establishment to serve the oldest inhabitants before newcomers.

Anna rewarded the unfriendly glance of the Frenchwoman with a stare, but Louise did not perceive it, for she was watching a family of Spaniards at the further table.

The wife, who spoke execrable French, wore her black hair in flat waves above a round smiling olive face; the two children, smartly clad in blue alpaca overalls, listened solemnly to their mother's chatter; and the father, brown-eyed, and blue-chinned, twirled his moustache and enjoyed his *déjeûner* in silence.

In the middle of the room an old French widow related to her neighbour the history of her misfortunes and illness, and the fact that fifteen Paris doctors had failed in turn to afford her any relief.

Her voice was of a peculiar piercing quality, so that she was unwittingly taking the whole room into her confidence, and the description of her symptoms appeared rather to embarrass than to interest her companion, who murmured her mistrust of doctors, and urged a pilgrimage to Lourdes.

All the other visitors were English or American, of the class to be found in cheap and out-of-the-way European hosteleries. The English, respectable, severe, carelessly clothed, and inclined to converse in whispers; the Americans louder-voiced, livelier, more natural, and infinitely better dressed.

"How thankful I shall be to get home again," said Miss Owen, surveying foreigners, compatriots, and transatlantic cousins with impartial disfavour. "I am sick of omelettes. I loathe sour claret, and vanilla flavouring, and I long for a good honest chop and a glass of Bass, and I don't care who knows it."

But she took care to state her views in a voice that could only be heard by Louise.

"You can get beer here—there is a man drinking some."

"Is it likely I should pay for beer, when I can get wine, however bad, for nothing? You are so unpractical, Louise."

"Let us go up-stairs," said her sister-in-law.

"Very well. I see no use in waiting. I've finished."

They rose from their places, and their passage among the crowded tables to the door was curiously illustrative of their characters.

Anna walked first, her plain aggressive face and tall flat-chested figure alike rigid with self-consciousness, her grey eyes glancing neither to the right nor to the left. Louise followed, responding naturally if timidly to the greetings bestowed by the habitués, though the dignity of her physical proportions belied the gentleness of her smile.

The staircase was uncarpeted and highly waxed and polished, as were the narrow landings and passages of the upper floor.

Anna opened one of the ill-fitting doors without knocking, and Louise followed her into Mrs. Owen's room.

Here were two wooden bedsteads and some cheap painted furniture. A red velvet-backed armchair was drawn up close to the open hearth, and an old woman was seated upon it, crouching towards the blazing logs for warmth, though the sun streamed through the windows.

She wore a black knitted tippet over her bent shoulders, and a black lace cap with a funereal ornament of gutta-percha flowers.

The commonplace was typified in her face as in her daughter's, but the grey eyes were a trifle

sharper than Anna's, and their regard less open, if less aggressive.

"Well? You look better since you've had your lunch," said Anna, in most unsympathetic tones. "Why aren't you lying down?"

"Because I prefer sitting up," said Mrs. Owen. "I've ordered the carriage, and I'm going to take another drive."

"I should have thought you'd better rest before your journey. That is if we really are going to-morrow, though after all the false alarms I sha'n't believe we're off till we're actually in the train," said Anna.

"The fresh air and scenery will do me good," said Mrs. Owen, in the tone of one resigned to take a necessary dose of unpleasant medicine. "You came last time, Anna, so Louise can come this time, if she chooses."

"Me? I'd rather walk, unless you want me," said Louise. "It's such a perfect day for walking." She looked beseechingly at Anna who gave an imperceptible nod.

"I'll go. I hate walking, and I've nothing to do. Everything's packed. You must wrap up well, mother. The sun is scorching, but the air has a nasty sharp bite in it which seems always the way in this treacherous climate. One comfort is that we shall get back to London at the very nicest time of the year. Every one returning to town, and though we don't know many people, it makes the place look lively; and the fogs will be over too."

"With my good will, I shall never come abroad again as long as I live," said Mrs. Owen, energetically.

Louise listened without interest. She had heard these sentiments uttered many times during the past eight months. She knew the opinions of Mrs. Owen and Anna, and their manner of expressing themselves, almost by heart; and if they had not spoken at all, she would have known, more or less, what they were thinking about; for the subjects that came within the ken of their imagination and experience were strictly limited in number and scope.

Though she assented or differed with mechanical regularity, their conversation meant no more to her than the ticking of the clock, or the crackling of the logs on the hearth; perhaps less, for either of these sounds was apt to call up a train of thought, and the remarks of her relations never had this effect.

When Anna had gone to prepare herself for the coming drive in the small one-horsed victoria,—Louise dutifully assisted her mother-in-law to dress, selected the thickest travelling rug to spread over her knees, and gave her an arm down-stairs.

The landlord himself put the old lady into the carriage; the *bonne* stood smiling on the steps, and the proprietress came out of her den, which guarded the entrance, and ordered the coachman to be very careful of these ladies, with as much solicitude and *empressment* as though Mrs. Owen had not disputed every item of the bill that morning presented.

The driver whipped up his aged horse, which cantered awkwardly down the high-road, so that the frail vehicle rocked from side to side.

"But that is only to begin," said the landlord, apologetically to Louise. "He ranges himself as

soon as he gets to the bottom of the hill, and then, my faith, the difficulty is to get him to march at all."

The carriage disappeared round the bend of the incline, and Louise went up-stairs to her own room and shut the door.

The charm of solitude appealed to her very strongly. Her window stood wide open, looking out, not on to the high-road and flat cabbage-fields in front of the hotel, but over the wild spring garden and flowering shrubs at the back; across the stream at the bottom of the ravine, to the mountains.

The little fields and gardens of the peasantry strove timidly, as it were, to climb those mighty slopes, and threw their little mantle of green about the base of the mountains; then cultivation faltered and failed, and the rocks jutted forth bare and bleak and brown above solitary human dwellings that looked like scattered toys. Here only the chamois hunter set foot.

Above rose the great peaks, seeming in their vast and lofty aloofness so far removed from earth, so close to heaven; veiled by that garment of virgin white, with the strange shadows of deep blue cast across the dazzling snow.

Louise held out her arms unconsciously.

"If one's soul could dwell there—on the heights"—she thought; gesture and aspiration alike were to her perfectly natural, for being alone she had neither criticism nor ridicule to fear; and she confused metaphor and reality in her mind with characteristic vagueness.

Her thoughts and wishes had always been held in check and hidden; never defined by utterance or discussion.

Slowly, during the past eight months, the consciousness of this vagueness of thought and purpose had been growing upon her.

The silent glory of the mountains absorbed her attention.

With her elbows on the window-sill, and her beautiful grave face resting upon her hands, she lost herself in dreams as she gazed.

The rapture was suddenly pierced by the recollection that it was a farewell that she was taking of the Pyrenees, and the thought followed:

"Why should it be a farewell? Surely it rests with me to do as I choose. I can come and go as I will; no mortal has the right to hinder me now. I am alone. I have freedom—the key of the world."

The thought had naturally occurred to her many times during the past eight months; to be banished with horror at first; put aside with a guilty sense of disloyalty and selfishness; but it had grown more insistent of late, and at last, had suffered only the weak resistance of postponement. A wavering resolve suddenly grew into a definite purpose.

"I will tell them—what I wish—when we get home. Not here. It would seem heartless here."

She withdrew from the open window, shivering slightly, for the air, as Anna had said, was chill except in the direct rays of the sun.

Her room was small, but exquisitely clean, which atoned for its bareness, in the eyes of Louise.

The green *volets* made blinds and curtains unnecessary in the opinion of the proprietors. The

great logs of oak lay upon the spotless hearth, and wooden bedstead and boarded floor alike were polished to perfection. The cloth upon her humble toilet table was freshly washed.

Her modest luggage, a small solid leather trunk and a brown bag, familiar possessions since her earliest childhood, stood by the door.

Beside them an object upon which her eyes rested sorrowfully—a man's portmanteau. She could not tell them now.

The room had lost its charm for the moment, and she decided to take her walk without delay, for the sun disappeared early in these mountain regions.

She put on her shady black hat, and went out, crossing the high-road, and climbing a narrow path, set here and there with rough stone steps—to the little village which looked down upon the hotel in the valley, from the green hillside opposite the mountain range.

She reached the market-place, and paused to take breath, and to scan the busy scene before her.

A fountain played in the shade of the acacias. The pollarded limes were here also, set in groups at the corners of the *place*. Stalls with onions, garlic, cheese, and oranges, succeeded each other with monotonous sameness, varied here and there by booths of cheap clothing and heaps of hardware and earthen pottery upon the paving-stones. Down the road from the hills came slowly patient oxen pulling a great waggon; horns bound to heavy wooden bars, and prisoned heads carried low as they trod their humble way, with white cloths spread over their backbones to keep off the sun and the flies.

At the further end of the square stood the old

church with open doors. Without—the wooden-shod peasants wrangled in *patois* whereof she was unable to distinguish a single word, over sacks of grain, and live fowls, and pigeons; within—the peace of space and silence reigned.

The altar of Marie was wreathed in pink roses; a picture of a virgin martyr beset by wild beasts in a Roman arena met her eyes, above a cheap iron stand of votive candles.

She rested for a moment, and came out again into the sunshine. Her steps were bent towards the winding road which led upwards to the hills, and her pilgrimage ended in the cemetery which lay among them.

A little French cemetery filled with tiny mortuary chapels, and glass-covered wreaths of tinsel flowers, and pious sentiments worked in beads. Lying away from the village and above it, with no human habitation near except a solitary white-washed convent, with a high narrow belfry, from which sounded a tinkling summons to Benediction.

But opposite were the majestic outlines of the Pyrenees, and, from this height, peaks invisible from the valley below, loomed into view; range upon range, snow-crowned, rose-flushed with the rays of the declining sun.

Louise lingered, watching, until the last red glory of the sunshine vanished from the topmost peak of the mountains, leaving only the cold pure severity of whiteness, and the grey blue of distance.

Then she turned and went down again into the valley.

CHAPTER II

LOUISE walked in the Park alone. There were no calls upon her time now. Even yet it appeared strange to her that she should be free to go out in the morning—to enjoy the April sunshine—to spend hours out of doors without that guilty suspicion of selfishness which had always beset her during her brief intervals of exercise.

With the silent attention peculiar to her, she observed the details of her surroundings.

The daffodils by thousands in the grass, the stiff waxen hyacinths in formal masses of colour, the delicate green of the young foliage sprung by yearly miracle from the coal-black stems of tree and shrub.

Motors rolled past her, carrying occupants wrapped in heavy furs; the unfashionable woman lolled in her one-horse landau, beaming in the sunshine and unheeding the chill east wind; the fashionable woman sat upright and indifferent in the snug shelter of her perfectly appointed brougham.

She passed benches whereon vagrants rested, and watched respectable hard-working women with shawls and baskets, pause to gaze wistfully over the dwarf palings which guarded the flower-beds.

Surreptitiously she pressed a coin from her

shabby purse into the hand of an old man with a white beard who was "minding" a little herd of tumbling babies. "To buy sweets for them," she said, hurriedly, lest he should suspect her of a desire to be charitable. But he saw only the appeal of her smile, and recognised the sympathy of a fellow-creature.

"Why you're a good Samaritan, you are reely," he said admiringly. "They don't get too many treats. Gawd bless you, Miss."

The words rang in her ears pleasantly as she went on her way.

Smart little children in scarlet coats and three-cornered black beaver hats ran joyfully past her. Louise looked not less sympathetically upon them than upon their little human brothers and sisters in rags.

Outside the palings red and yellow omnibuses, brewers' drays and railway vans rattled noisily, and hansoms threaded their way in and out of the traffic; but the many noises were blended into a subdued roar that did not disturb her thoughts as she walked.

The mist of smoke softened the distant trees into a grey haze whence blue cupolas and spires faintly emerged. She realised with surprise the picturesqueness of the town landscape, and was inspired by the atmosphere of relief and gaiety and emancipation which a few days' consecutive sunshine bestows upon London.

She felt fresh courage and determination glow within her.

"Before I sleep to-night—I will tell them—" said Louise.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck eight.

"The journey—or the relief of being at home again—has done mother good. How thankful I am to be here once more," said Anna.

Louise said nothing. She glanced slightly round the first floor sitting-room of the Kensington lodging, which her mother-in-law had occupied for the past fifteen years.

An indescribable dreariness pervaded the room, which was lighted by gas, now turned thriftily down in the centre chandelier.

Below this faint illumination, stood a round table, holding the remains of a meal which Mrs. Owen persisted in calling late dinner, though it consisted of but a single dish. The table-cloth was dingy, and the plated forks and spoons were dingier still.

A cheap suite of plush-seated chairs and sofas, decorated with brass nails, furnished the apartment. In the corner stood an invalid's *chaise longue*, and reading-stand.

On a mahogany chiffonier was a heap of miscellaneous books from a lending library.

Reading is the drug which soothes loneliness of spirit, and Louise had indulged in it that afternoon until head and eyes ached alike.

"Of course mother will miss Dr. Morgan," said Anna. "I don't know how she'll get on with the new man, particularly since it was he who suggested poor Frederick's going abroad—but it was n't likely Dr. Drew could have the experience of a great man like Dr. Morgan. I like him better than Dr. Morgan for that matter, and so did poor Fred; besides his living close by being such an advantage.

Dr. Morgan always gave himself airs, to my mind; however I suppose it was natural, and of course it was very good of him to come all this way to see Frederick, for I don't suppose he had any other patients on his list half so badly off as we are, being such a fashionable doctor. I can't think why he retired, for he was only fifty, and getting to the top of the tree. And I can't believe he'd enjoy going to live in Wales, property or no property, nor his wife either, hankering after society as she did. It must have been a fine sell for her."

All this Anna had said before many times; nevertheless Louise flushed when she heard it again.

"Dr. Morgan is a friend in a thousand," she said, in a low voice. "We haven't so many that we can afford to lose one."

"We know quite as many people as we want to know," said Anna decisively. "The Vicar and his wife, and Mr. Pollard," her rasping tones softened slightly as she pronounced the curate's name, "and Dr. and Mrs. Drew, and plenty of others. I agree with mother that living as retired as we do, on a small income, the only way to maintain one's position at all is to fight shy of scraping acquaintance with all the tag rag and bob tail who want to know *us*."

Louise never argued, and her mother-in-law and Anna consequently found her companionship disappointing. Their own intercourse consisted chiefly in a series of flat contradictions, which appeared to give satisfaction to both parties concerned, but they agreed that Louise was but a poor conversationalist.

"However, of course this life must be dull for

you, now," said Anna in not unkindly tones. "I don't forget you're nearly twenty years younger than I am."

Either because of that softening in her sister-in-law's harsh voice, or because the semi-obscurity of the room gave her courage,—Louise was suddenly moved to break the silence which had defended her thoughts and feelings for years, from the possibility of unsympathetic comment.

"Anna, what do I care for dulness? I may be nearly twenty years younger than you are, but I am thirty-three—a middle-aged woman. Am I looking for gaiety? Is it likely? Can't you realise what these rooms must be to me now? Here in the very corner where I sat reading to Frederick—giving Frederick his meals and his medicine—waiting upon him from morning till night. In the room upstairs I start out of my sleep even after all these months away—thinking he must be wanting me—hearing his call—hour after hour—night after night—" She hid her face in her hands.

"No one denies you did your duty by Frederick," said Anna, in subdued tones, "and no one knows better than I how trying he could be. Of course mother didn't always make allowances. But you must remember he was her only son. She couldn't see him as you and I and other people did, poor fellow."

"You misunderstand me. I'm not complaining of anything," said Louise simply. "If there was anything—why—it's all buried in his grave. After all, in all the fifteen years of our marriage we never had a quarrel. What does it matter if I was sometimes—tired?"

"I think it would have been better if you *had* quarrelled, and held your own," said Anna stolidly. "It would have cleared the air. Invalids grow very exacting if you don't pull them up now and then. Look at mother. Her tussles with me keep her going. I always said you spoilt Frederick and made him worse than ever, and I say so still."

"It isn't my nature to tussle. Let the past alone, Anna," said Louise entreatingly. "You were very good to me—at times—or I think I could not have gone on so long."

"I!" said Anna, almost starting. Her conscience pricked her. "I'm sure I didn't mean to be good to you," she said, with self-conscious awkwardness.

"I dare say you *did* mean to without knowing it," said Louise pleadingly. "And I depended on you more than you think. I look back and see it all now. Somehow one can see life as a whole more clearly when there is—a grave in the background."

Then she stopped short, realising nervously that she had spoken in the manner which her relatives were wont to condemn as affected; but Anna let the words pass without comment, and Louise hurried on, grateful for the omission.

"When first I came to live with you and Aunt Emma, I used to think you—unkind," she said, almost apologetically. "But gradually as I grew up, it dawned upon me that *you* were to be depended upon always—in one sense—because at least—at least you were always honest."

"I try to be," said Anna, gruffly, divided between the consciousness that this encomium was

deserved, and a suspicion that Louise was trying to flatter her.

"I think I value sincerity more than anything in the world," Louise said. "I don't mean what Aunt Emma calls sincerity, just telling unpleasant home-truths to other people, but ——"

"We like plain-speaking," interpolated Anna.

"But the sincerity which insists on one's every thought and word and act being in accord with one's own highest principles," said Louise, patiently. "That seems to me the most difficult thing in life. I think you *do* act up to your own principles, Anna."

"Such as they are, you mean," said Anna, with unexpected shrewdness. "Well—I don't pretend to all the high-flown ideals you find in your non-sensical books. Honesty is good enough for me. I believe poor Frederick's shuffling ways drove me to the opposite extreme. I dare say it was part of his illness, poor fellow," she added hastily, "and as you say, it's over and done with. We ought to forget it."

"It's all over, and there's nothing more for me to do, here——" said Louise, in tones that trembled a little.

"One would think, though of course these rooms are sad enough—that you'd be glad of the rest," Anna said in a low voice. "I'm sure you've earned it."

"I rested—out there, for eight months," Louise answered. "That was real rest."

"I don't see how that could have been more real rest than this," said Anna, obstinately. "In a strange hotel, with no home comforts about you.

And mother so frightfully ill all the winter. You took your share of nursing her. Where did the rest come in?"

"I can't describe the difference. You would think it nonsense if I told you the mountains rested me," said Louise, hardly above her breath. "You would say it was only my affectation, and would n't believe it."

"I believe you *think* you think so," said Anna, grudgingly, and this was a great concession. "One can think anything if one gives way to fancifulness. I never do."

"When I left, I asked myself this," said Louise. "If I loved the mountains so, why should I come away? Why should I return to these rooms which I hate—yes *hate*——" her gentleness became lost in a sudden passion, and Anna no longer questioned her sincerity. "There are no more duties to tie me here. I am free—to do as I like."

"You don't mean you want to go back to that melancholy cloudy dead-alive basin among the mountains to *live* with not so much as an English church, nor a resident English doctor," cried Anna, her practical mind aghast.

Louise paused before she answered, mastering the feelings which had overcome her.

"I do not mean to that particular place—not necessarily. It is not the only beautiful place in the world. There are thousands that I have never seen, which I mean to see, if I live long enough." She struck a note of defiance. "But if we had never been there, if Frederick had died here, where we spent all our married life, I might never have had the courage to talk to you like this. I found

courage—there, and I only put it off because I thought it seemed heartless, out there where he died, to speak of leaving you.”

“Where would you go?” said Anna, as though bewildered.

“I will tell you my plans,” said Louise, “if you will help me to break it to Aunt Emma that I am going away from you both—for good.”

Her heart beat fast, but with triumph that exceeded the alarm.

The words were irrevocably spoken, and the skies had not fallen; in other words, Anna had evinced neither overwhelming indignation nor surprise.

“If I had been less cowardly I could have settled it long ago,” thought Louise, astonished.

“I don’t believe in breaking things to people,” said Anna. “I’ll tell her, of course, if you’re afraid. But I shall tell her plump out. There never was any particular love lost between you, so I don’t see how she can complain if you take yourself off. Of course it seems—well, it seems odd—after all these years.”

“You—you don’t mind?” said Louise entreatingly.

“I—why should I mind?” said Anna, with hasty brusquerie. “It just seems odd, that’s all.”

It did not appear to occur to her to say more; she sat motionless in the dusk, waiting for further particulars.

“When I made up my mind first on the subject,” Louise said timidly, “I wrote to Dr. Morgan for advice. Before he went away, he gave me leave to write to him, at any time, if I found myself in difficulties.”

Anna grunted.

"He—he—often praised my aptitude for nursing—I asked him if it would be possible, at my age, to find regular work of that kind. If anyone could help me to find it, of course he could. He must still have a great deal of influence. And there must be simple cases which, with my experience, I could undertake as easily as a trained nurse. I am used to sitting up at night, and—and everything. I must do something with my life, and that appears to me the only thing I am fit for."

"Well?"

"I need n't go into all the ins and outs," said Louise, hurriedly. "I'm afraid I suggested all sorts of impossible or unlikely things. Finding some rich patient who would want to travel, and so on. But I told him too that I was willing to nurse the poor if it might only be in the country, among the beautiful surroundings I care for so much——" She drew a long breath. "And in some cheap place where I could afford to live and work for nothing—and yet to take a holiday sometimes, too. His answer came to-night."

"Well?"

"It is a very kind one. He says he can find me plenty of work, but that he advises me to rest a little longer before I begin; and he offers me a cottage in their own grounds——"

"A cottage!" said Anna, sharply. "It would be a come-down, after this nice address, to go and live in a cottage belonging to Dr. Morgan. My mother would n't like *that*. It's not even as if they were ordinary lodgings. Everyone knows the landlord was once grandpapa's butler. And you'd

have to buy furniture. Where is the money to come from? How unpractical you are, Louise."

"No, it is furnished. And the rent is only ten pounds a year. I don't think it would be unpractical, Anna. With my settlement, and my own fifty pounds a year, that would leave me a hundred and forty to spend. Surely I could live on that and keep one little maid, in the country. Anyway, I would like to try, for—a year."

"You don't even know what it's like. It's buying a pig in a poke."

"Dr. Morgan says it is not unlike—the Pyrenees on a small scale. He used to talk to me of missing the mountains, and I did not know what he meant—then. I do now. He talked to me also about his father's house, the place he has inherited, and where he is living now. I feel as if I knew it. My only fear was—would it make too much difference to Aunt Emma if I withdraw the hundred a year that was Frederick's and mine?"

"As you know very well, I'm not in mother's confidence. I know no more what her exact income is than the cat on the roof," said Anna, glumly. "But I do know that when poor Frederick was alive he must have cost her far more than a hundred a year; and now he's gone, and without even your board or your room to pay for—you need n't bother your head about that."

"Thank you," said Louise, gratefully.

"I'll speak to her now, at once, this very night," said Anna, rising. "I hate putting things off," and she left the room with her usual abruptness.

Mrs. Owen listened to her daughter's communica-

tion in silence and then in sour tones, said something about ingratitude.

"Nonsense, mamma," said Anna, "what does she owe you, after all?"

"Did I not take her in, a wretched little orphan, though my own family had not spoken to her father for years."

"Her father was your own brother, and since both her parents were dead, what else could you do? Somebody had to take her. And her fifty pounds a year paid for her keep and her schooling," said the practical Anna. "Besides, if we did take her in, we weren't over tender with her. Something she said to-night made me remember what a frightened little thing she used to be. I thought her shy and could n't bear her, so I was glad when she was packed off to a boarding-school."

"She was sly," said Mrs. Owen, energetically. "A sly child turns into an artful woman. She has never been frank or open with any of us: always honey and sweetness and nothing else."

Anna was perplexed. She too looked upon amiability as insincerity, and fell into the vulgar error of confounding surliness with honesty. Nor did she realise how easily candour may be rendered impossible to a timid nature out of harmony with its surroundings, yet almost fatally anxious to please.

"I don't know," she said, after a pause. "You and I are downright enough, mother—Frederick was n't."

"It was his illness—his illness that warped his real nature from the first," said Mrs. Owen, vehemently. "And Louise got round him, too, the very

day she came back from school. And now she proposes to take herself off with the hundred a year I settled on Frederick at his marriage and which comes back to me since he has died without leaving children. I took care of that."

"She does n't know it," said Anna. "She thinks it was his own money, and you may be very sure he never told her it was n't. Come, mother, justice is justice. A nurse for Frederick would have cost more than that. She's earned it over and over again. Put it plainly. He wanted a nurse and a slave and a plaything all in one, and you handed Louise over to him—at eighteen—as you'd have got him the moon if he'd wanted it as much as he wanted Louise."

Mrs. Owen moved uneasily in her chair, and avoided her daughter's eye.

"Let her do what she likes," she said in a low voice, after a short silence, "I won't lift up my little finger to keep her here if she wants to go."

"And you won't put any doubts into her head about the settlement money?"

"No."

"You'll let her keep it?"

"Yes."

Anna dropped the subject. She knew her mother never broke her word.

"I don't want any coolness ——" said Mrs. Owen suddenly. "I won't have any talk about her going. She must seem to have my full approval, mind that. Let it be understood that her room here will be always reserved for her in case of her return. I can easily come to an arrangement with

Mrs. Patterson about that. It need cost nothing, or next to nothing."

Anna lingered at the door.

"I can do with a smaller allowance, mamma, if there's any difficulty," she said gloomily.

"There is none. Go down-stairs now. I am tired and want to go to sleep," said Mrs. Owen, as shortly as though her fifty-year-old daughter were an importunate child.

Anna went down-stairs, feeling a little troubled, even a little remorseful in her mind, as she thought of the departure of Louise, but opening the door of the sitting-room, such thoughts vanished, for she found the curate, Mr. Pollard, there, seated opposite her sister-in-law.

He was an old friend, and sometimes came in thus informally after dinner, for his rooms were next door.

"We have missed you very much in the parish, Miss Owen," he said, rising to greet her. "This is the first moment I have had to myself, so I came to welcome you home; but I am afraid it is a sad home-coming for you all," he added, with the directness of one accustomed to pay visits of condolence.

He was an elderly looking man, between forty and fifty years old, of narrow intellect, but with a singleness of purpose that appealed to Anna, who cherished almost unconsciously a sentimental liking for him, which translated itself into a warm interest in parish matters.

Mr. Pollard respected her energy and downright-ness, and perhaps found the slight suggestion of homage in her manner not displeasing.

It was so well understood that he was Anna's friend that Louise presently made an excuse, and left them together. The curate's eyes followed her to the door.

"Yes, she has given me the particulars—though no more than your kind letter told me," he said. "As you so wisely put it—deeply sad as these things are at the time, it cannot be said in this instance to be anything but a merciful release."

"Between you and me, who knew what he was, it would be absurd to call it anything else, poor fellow," said Anna, in blunt but subdued tones.

"And for *her* above all," said Mr. Pollard. "Her life of utter self-sacrifice was no doubt brightened by the sweetness of her nature; but to the looker-on, it could only appear as one long martyrdom. One may venture to hope that, beautiful and gentle as she is, a little happiness may now, by the grace of God, be in store for her."

Anna was startled by the fervour with which Mr. Pollard spoke, and by the glow of feeling in his thin face.

Suddenly she realised that, after all, she was not sorry, but almost glad, that Louise was going away.

CHAPTER III

LOUISE lay dreaming among the great grey boulders scattered over the wild uplands, with face upturned to the sky, where the clouds were threatening to conquer the sun.

Far away in the distance were to be discerned the irregular outlines of the Welsh mountains, but the smaller hills rose above and around her on every side.

There was a soft warmth in the west wind which swept across the downs, rippling the short, dry grass like a silver sea, whitening a great expanse of bluebells, and shaking the sturdy clumps of broom, crowned now with bright gold blossom.

A little lower down a finer turf was spread beneath the light-green foliage of the swaying top-heavy elms.

The brilliant emerald of the larches contrasted with the dark yews among the forest trees, yet bare of foliage.

The primroses nestling in wind-swept corners, too lowly to fear the rude breath of the spring gales, lingered yet in flower, and the slender mauve milkmaids hovered lightly above the clover, amid uncrumpling fern and opening Stars of Bethlehem.

The gorse, mercilessly destroyed by fire to save the grass, made brown patches upon the hillside.

A grove of old gnarled pear trees and wild cherry trees, scattered white petals on the breeze. From the tangle of last year's withered bracken at her feet, new growth of bramble and gorse, thrust forth eager heads, among a thousand baby oaks, which would never grow up, but be mown remorseless with the fern, or trodden down by the cattle on this rough pasturage.

Above her head, in the veiled brilliance of the grey sky, a hawk was poised, almost motionless, keenly intent on its invisible prey. The song of the lark flooded the air above the sighing of the wind in the elms.

A fitful gleam of sunshine suddenly broke forth, and the beauty around her became transfigured; it glorified the blue of the wild hyacinth, the yellow of the broom, and the delicate tints of the young foliage of oak and thorn; gilding alike the grey of the lichen-grown stone and the ruddiness of the brown earth.

"Let her alone," said Dr. Morgan to his wife. "She is resting. There is plenty of time before her yet."

"But she says herself she had eight months rest in the Pyrenees, and she looks the picture of health. Never have I seen her look so well before."

"She rested her body, but now it is her soul that is resting," said the doctor. "Let her alone. Remember she has never seen the country in May in her life, and try to imagine to yourself what her feelings must be."

"I don't think that is an excuse for wasting all day and every day, dear, doing absolutely *nothing*,"

said his wife, gently. "And I hope she is beginning to feel that herself, for she said yesterday that only your positive orders that she was to do nothing for the present had salved her conscience. It is very extraordinary to me that her conscience should be so easily salved. Mine wouldn't be. I don't think the country in May, though I know how pretty it is, would tempt me to spend three whole weeks mooning about out of doors from morning till night."

"No dear, I don't think it would," said Dr. Morgan, and his eyes twinkled; for his wife had the good luck to amuse him still, though he had lived with her for thirty odd years.

"I think you are a little weak about Mrs. Owen, dear. She is very sweet, but she is not a person of any strength of character," said Mrs. Morgan, thoughtfully, "or she could hardly put herself in your hands so completely as she does. Though of course I know a doctor is not like an ordinary man."

"Thank you, Mary. But don't you think it showed some strength of character to stick to that—that poor creature—Fred Owen, for fifteen years?"

"My dear! I am sure she is a thoroughly good woman. What *could* a man's wife do but stick to him," said Mrs. Morgan, sincerely shocked. "She took him for better or for worse—in sickness or in health."

"Yes dear; at eighteen," said the Doctor.

"And though of course I know he ought never to have married at all, in his state of health—yet—I was very little older than that when I married

you, and I am sure I should have stuck to you, Lewis, if you had been ever so ill."

"I am sure you would, Mary," said the doctor, kindly.

"But I am afraid the habit of sitting by herself and dreaming will grow upon her, if she gives way to it like this."

"What would you have her do——" he said impatiently.

"You say she is such a wonderful nurse——"

"She is, wonderful. If there is such a thing as a genius for nursing she has it. But she has been nursing all her life; surely you don't grudge her a little space of idleness. I will find her plenty to do in the village when winter comes on. Let her enjoy the summer while she can."

Mrs. Morgan shook her head.

"If she only took a little knitting out with her, it would be something," she said.

The doctor changed the subject.

"Come and look at the feathers on this section of a butterfly's wing, Mary," he said, stooping over his microscope.

Mrs. Morgan came obediently across the room and peeped over his shoulder.

"Yes, dear, very pretty, indeed. But I'm too busy to stay now," she said, and left the room precipitately. "Once he begins showing me things in his microscope, I should lose my whole morning before I knew where I was," she thought.

She was a well-preserved woman, bearing her fifty years lightly; her figure was tall and slight to attenuation; and her height increased by snow-white hair dressed very high above a delicate pointed

face, with light grey eyes, a rather long nose, a waxen complexion, and a small sweet obstinate mouth.

She confessed to her daughters, who were both happily married and settled in London, that her husband had likened her during their days of courtship to a Dresden china shepherdess; and she did her best to preserve the illusion still, wearing dainty flowered gowns with fluttering ribbons, and bestowing immense care upon her appearance.

Dr. Morgan liked pretty things about him, and could afford a wife who was fond of dress. It was his good fortune that she had proved amiable, and a clever housekeeper, for he had chosen her exclusively for her looks, when both were young and she a very pretty girl. If she were not intellectual or even particularly sympathetic, yet it had suited him well, when he returned jaded and tired, from his trying work, to find her always exquisite, smiling, and unruffled; his home in perfect order, and his children pictures of health and neatness.

She was striving conscientiously to enjoy her new position as wife of a small country squire; but her husband had been a rather popular London doctor with a large circle of acquaintance, in the professional, literary, and artistic world; and she could not help regretting her receptions, her dinner-parties, and her daily callers.

Life in this out-of-the-way valley seemed very dull, as the first fervour of arranging her new abode began to cool.

The advent of Louise, to which she had looked forward with pleasure, was proving something of a disappointment.

Their acquaintance had been in reality of the slightest, though to please her husband this excellent wife had called it a friendship.

But Mrs. Morgan was not by nature much given to friendships. She was absorbed in multitudinous small occupations, from attending personally to every detail of her household economy, to making socks for her grandchildren.

Her conversation was discursive, but inclined to be pointless, and usually limited to comments upon the trivial events of her daily existence, mingled with remarks upon the fashionable intelligence columns in the newspapers, where the doings of people she did not know and could never hope to meet, appeared to inspire her with the most lively interest.

Since she loved only the concrete, and Louise delighted in the abstract, they could not be said to possess many tastes in common; nevertheless, Mrs. Morgan liked Louise, and sincerely desired to befriend her.

"It will be more cheerful, anyway, to have her close at hand, and be able to pop in to tea with her sometimes," she reflected; and she had striven to render the proposed abode of her friend as perfect as possible.

She found her a jewel of a cook, in the person of an old Welshwoman, who would do everything except tolerate a fellow-servant; and who asked for nothing better in the world than a mistress who took no interest in housekeeping, who did not object to calling her Mrs. Jones, nor even suggest that she ought to wear a cap; and who permitted her, above all, to keep a little mongrel to which she was passionately attached.

Louise had intended to spend the whole day upon the mountain-side, but the charm of freedom, included the following of the whim of the moment, and that led her homewards before the afternoon shadows grew long; for the sun conquered the clouds as the day advanced.

It was a home, after all, from which there was no need to escape; for peace and solitude dwelt there, as upon the hill-top; undisturbed by Mrs. Jones, who rose at cock-crow to clean the cottage, and thereafter confined herself strictly to her own quarters; bringing meals, and taking them away in calm unbroken silence; too deaf to wish for conversation, or to be able, indeed, to maintain it.

The cottage was built of rough stone, and stood at the foot of Dr. Morgan's garden, on the edge of a wood, approached by a steep and rocky lane.

It was hidden in a little dip of the hill-side whereon his paternal acres were spread, and was not visible from his own house.

This more pretentious mansion, white-walled, and green-shuttered, stood forth boldly on an exposed promontory, jutting over the valley below, and bearing the descriptive name of Brach-y-gwynt; for it was cradled in the arms of those winds which never reached the sheltered corner wherein the cottage lay.

The roughness of the smaller building was its safeguard against ugliness; though it had been erected with no thought of the picturesque.

Great blocks of old red sandstone from the quarry in the wood had been piled together by local workmen, to form an eight-roomed dwelling, which was intended, and sometimes used, as a kind of humble

dower-house. But loving hands had tended the creepers which veiled its rude proportions and high-pitched stone-tiled roof, and had laid out the little shelf of garden before its latticed windows.

The high walls which surrounded cottage and garden alike, were built in a day when labour was cheap, and since stone cost nothing, and time had not been lacking, they resembled fortifications in depth and thickness. They bore a century's growth of ivy, moss, and lichen, and upon their earthy summits, between loosened coping stone and crumbling tile sprang a variety of self-planted misshapen dwarf sycamores, and ash, and stunted gooseberry bushes, and straggling wall-flower.

The white stone-crop, here known as Snow-upon-the-mountain, hung over the flights of ancient steps that led upwards to the door from the doctor's grounds, and downwards to the wood sheds and paved yard opening into the lane below.

It was a humble cottage garden enough, with its sloping lawn covered with daisies since yesterday's mowing by the doctor's gardeners, who included it in their care. But it was also very restful, and full of colour and brightness, with its clumps of pheasant-eyed narcissus, standing in beds of violet leaves, its sweet-scented red and white stocks, its masses of yellow tulips, and gay pansies.

A beautiful tree-peony ornamented one side of the little lawn, and on the other a spring-flowering magnolia held up purple-veined translucent cups to catch the sunshine.

Above the walls, stretching right away to the heights of the hills which sheltered the cottage and garden, rose the woods. Dark solemn firs,

freshly tipped with bright emerald, the delicate yellow of the oaks unfolding new foliage, the red buds of the chestnuts, the smooth green of the young beech, and the fairy tresses of the silver-stemmed weeping birch.

Here and there stood the sombre ivy-clad trunks of dead monarchs of the forest, never again to wake to the call of spring; motionless ghosts among the fluttering garments of their living comrades, yet clinging to their places, though become their own monuments; and here and there were the gay and lovely forms of the bird-cherry, transparent bouquets of snowy flower unbroken by a single leaf.

Over the moss-grown tiles of the low solid porch, the montana clematis flung its heavy trails, and clusters of star-eyed blossoms opened to the sun; the yellow honeysuckle scented the air, and the magic of May pervaded the closing day.

The little mongrel on the red-tiled floor of the kitchen pricked up his ears and wagged his tail, thereby warning Mrs. Jones that her mistress had returned.

She looked into the garden to make sure, and then carried a laden tray into the porch, and set it down upon the wooden table before the broad oak seat whereon Louise had thrown herself, wearied with her long climb.

It was nothing to Mrs. Jones if her employer chose unaccountably to defer eating her mid-day meal until four o'clock in the afternoon.

It was ready at one, hot; and ready at four, cold: she brought it without comment, and withdrew without hearing the soft word of thanks

which Louise could not help uttering, though she knew it fell upon deaf and indifferent ears.

There was a plump cold chicken, and a spring salad, a homely brown loaf, some young gooseberries stewed, and a generous jug of thick yellow cream, served with scrupulous care and cleanliness.

To Louise, accustomed to the poor fare and slovenly service of a London lodging, it appeared a sumptuous feast, and she did it justice, seated in the shade of the porch, and looking from this coign of vantage down upon the valley and the village, and over the wide prospect of the opposite hills and the distant Welsh mountains.

Far below her a roaring tumbling little river foamed over the rocky channel which wound its way through the valley past the straggling village of Glascwm.

On a level with her eyes were the round towers and castellated turrets of a fine old Norman castle, among its surrounding woods of larch and pine; and plainly to be discerned was its avenue of mighty ancient yews, winding upwards in many a curve and turn through the wild beautiful park which sloped to the water's edge.

Above the high plateau on which the castle stood, rose the bare and rounded tops of the hills, and stretching away into the distance were rugged peaks, and mountainous scenery; but the little valley was green and fertile, nestling amid its wild surroundings; a land flowing with milk and honey, indeed.

Mrs. Jones allowed a decent interval to elapse, and then without waiting for any summons, removed the remains of the luncheon, preserving the

same calm silence as she did so. Then Louise was alone again.

The warmth and the stillness, and the intensity of her realisation of well-being, induced drowsiness, and her thoughts glided into dreams. It seemed to her that she could not have slept for more than a moment, for she had hardly lost the delicious sensation of impending unconsciousness, when she opened her eyes with a start, and found Dr. Morgan standing by the porch, smiling down upon her.

"I am afraid the click of the garden-door woke you," he said apologetically.

"Oh!" said Louise, rubbing her eyes, "how dreadful! I am ashamed of myself."

She was really conscience-stricken.

"It is a habit I indulge myself in so regularly that you must not ask me to be shocked," he said smiling. "My wife sent me to see if you were at home, and if you would come up to tea."

"With pleasure, but I have only just lunched. I was out early. I wanted to see the very top of the May morning, and I had climbed a long way up the hill by eight o'clock."

"No wonder I found you asleep!"

"I am only tired from sheer luxury of idleness," she confessed. "The drowsiness of the warm sunshine and the humming of the bees in this garden of delight lulled me to sleep. You know I *really* feel like a giant refreshed, and it is time I began to think of being of some use to somebody. You will find me work sooner or later, won't you?"

"Sooner or later. The opportunity will present itself."

"Before I get too old," she said wistfully. "It's

very tiresome to wake suddenly out of a long, long dream as I have done, and find oneself grown old. I mean for a woman."

"I am glad you added that," said the doctor, drily.

"Especially for nursing—when younger women with all the advantages of a scientific training, may so well be preferred."

"I'll see about it," he said briefly. "There is no hurry. Climb hills while you can."

"Do you never climb them?"

"Not now." He shook his head. "I tried, when I came here first to take some of the walks which had seemed nothing to me as a boy, and I realised what the passing of the years had done for me. Even walking downhill tires me now."

"Rest for a little while before we go up to the house," said Louise, anxiously. "It is quite early."

"Nearly five," he said, smiling, "but I will take a quarter of an hour. Go on talking."

He leant his head back restfully against the wall of the porch, and closed his eyes.

Louise observed him attentively.

He was hardly over fifty years old, but he looked much older, for he had not spared himself fatigue in his life-work.

An eager strenuous humorous face, with drooping eyelids half veiling the eyelashes, and curtaining kind bright hazel eyes; scanty iron-grey hair, but a thick curling beard, and a moustache twisted upwards, revealing rather full and sympathetic lips, habitually parted as though their owner were about to speak.

"It seems so extraordinary to see you sitting

there, quite calm and restful, as though you had nothing particular to do," said Louise. "I have never seen you until now, you know, except in a hurry, and I can't get over the feeling that in a moment you will spring up, and run down to your carriage, and that I shall be listening to hear you slam the door and drive away."

"I have the same feeling that that is what I ought to be doing," he acknowledged, "to say nothing of the fact that I am altogether overcome at times, with a strange bewildered sensation that I have lost my personality of so many years, and become again the boy who used to live here."

"I understand that," she said, nodding.

"It is besides, a great change from a life of constant rush,—to one of unbounded leisure," he added with a sigh.

"You don't regret it?"

He hesitated.

"It must hold always—something of regret—to an active mind, that sensation of work laid down—for ever"—he said, slowly, "but I had several reasons for retiring, which I will give you, if you care to hear them."

He looked at the beautiful face opposite him, and the expression of interest and solicitude was so unmistakable that he thought she had answered him, and did not wait for words.

"In the first place," he said frankly, "I have been very fortunate, as you know, and have made a great deal of money; there was no need for me to go on working—from that point of view. Then my old father died, and as it was against his wish that I took up medicine as a profession, I had

promised him to give up my practice and settle down here when the place came to me. Thirdly ——” he looked at Louise with a very kind and sad smile, “it is perhaps selfish to tell you, but I am very human, and I rather yearn for sympathy ——”

“Tell me,” said Louise; she stretched her hand impulsively across the oak table which divided them.

“Thirdly—I came away—because Death tapped me on the shoulder,” said the doctor, still smiling, “quite a light tap, but still an imperative one. I have disease of the heart. I may live for a year or two, but again, I may have to go—at any moment; and to ‘make my soul,’ perhaps this silent home among the mountains is better than London. Besides I wanted very much to fulfil my father’s wish, and also to set this place in order for my son, who will come back from the Argentine where he is doing very well—when ——” He stopped short, for Louise had turned white to the lips.

“My dear child,” he said, distressed, “I am a selfish brute, but I did not dream you would take it to heart.”

She shook her head and tried to speak, but could not.

“My dear, it touches me to the quick that you should feel it so,” said the doctor, in moved accents, and he lifted and kissed respectfully the slender hand still stretched towards him upon the table.

They were both silent, and the colour returned slowly to the face of Louise, as he reproached himself again, vehemently, for selfishness.

"It is perhaps partly selfishness on my part, also," she said, with a faint unsteady smile, "for after all, you are the only real friend I have in all the world."

Mrs. Morgan had often proclaimed her friendship for Mrs. Owen, but in this moment fraught with emotion, it is to be feared that both the doctor and Louise forgot this interesting fact; for Mrs. Morgan was of that company of insignificant souls who do not seem to count, when their larger-hearted fellows are face to face with the realities of life and death.

"Yes, I am your friend. I have always been your friend," he said, simply, "though I believe I have never said so in so many words until this moment. But you must have known."

"I knew, though I never knew how to express my gratitude in words, either," she said, with sudden passion. "Do you think I didn't realise—how good you were to come all that way—great doctor as you were—year after year—and never grow tired——"

"I was not such a great doctor when you came to see me first," he said, as lightly as he could, "and to speak from a strictly professional point of view—you must remember that your husband's case was a very interesting one."

She was silent again, and the doctor's memory reverted to the first time he had seen her. A young girl, very timid and gentle, with a promise of noble beauty in her straight features and unformed figure, which had since been fulfilled to the utmost of his expectations.

He had thought her a mere child, and learnt

with amaze that she had called to beg him to visit her husband. Curiosity almost more than pity led him to consent to her request. He found the strange family in their Kensington lodging; struggling between poverty and an anxious pitiful gentility; the pretentious, sour-faced mother; the defiant spinster-daughter; the shabby, beautiful, frightened girl-wife; and to his lasting wrath and indignation, the querulous, thirty-five-year-old, prematurely grey bridegroom; a hopeless invalid, in a condition which necessitated constant medical attendance, and perpetual nursing.

The doctor became, from that hour, the secret champion of Louise. Instantly discerning that any display of his feelings would render his sympathy useless to its object, he devoted himself to the invalid, and used such small influence as he was able to maintain over that feeble but suspicious mind, to lighten her lot indirectly whenever he found occasion to do so.

But he had to contend not only against the sullen selfishness of the husband, but against the jealousy of the mother and sister; and all three lived so entirely outside his own sphere that intercourse beyond his professional visits was practically impossible.

Only of late years had the acquaintance grown between Louise and his wife, whom he had induced to visit old Mrs. Owen after enlisting her sympathy for his protégée.

He was recalled to the present by the sound of that soft voice.

"Did you tell me because you thought I could—help you in any way?" she asked. "Oh, if I

could, how very very glad I should be, to repay a little, a very little, of the great debt I owe you—that I have owed you all these years.”

“I suppose more than one motive urged me to tell you,” he said, rather wistfully. “The sympathy that I know, that I have always instinctively known, to exist between us, made me feel how much your companionship would lighten—the dark hours that may perhaps be coming to me. And I liked too, the thought that you would be at hand to comfort and help—my wife. You see I know something—a great deal, of your patience and tenderness.”

“She knows——?”

“No, she does not know. You may suppose I did not decide to keep it from her without long and careful reflection. But my knowledge of her character helped me to this decision. She could not bear the suspense—the waiting for such a blow to fall—it would cast too deep a shadow over her busy cheerful days. She would grow nervous and miserable, and wear herself to pieces—and that would re-act upon me, and shake my own self-control.” He spoke as though thinking aloud, so completely did he realise the silent responsiveness of his listener. “But she will bear the blow with fortitude when it is a thing that is over—that can’t be helped. Nay, though she will mourn sincerely enough, poor soul, she will grow to think it was all for the best, poor Mary. God bless her,” he said, always with that faint amused smile hovering upon his lips. “There, you see, I’m asking a favour of you which I would not ask but that your love for the mountains put it into my head. It will be no hardship to you to

live among them a little longer than you may have intended."

He paused, but again she was unable to speak, and he changed his tone to cheerfulness.

"There, we will not dwell upon this topic—it is not wholesome for either of us to think too much of what is sad. But I want you to know that I have not neglected your wishes. I have written letters concerning you to one or two of my colleagues, who will find you easily all the employment you could desire—later. Meantime—there is no doctor, no cottage hospital, no arrangements for nursing the sick poor, in this little village—so if you will be content with such work as may come in your way here for the moment—your presence will confer an inestimable boon upon me."

Her great dark eyes, wet with tears, met his gaze.

"There, there, my dear, you need not say a word. I can read it all—in your face," he said, huskily. And they exchanged a silent handclasp.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. MORGAN was hovering impatiently in the verandah of her pretty drawing-room, when her husband and Louise presently came slowly up the steep drive.

"Here they are at last," she cried with great relief, and made imperative signs to hasten their footsteps.

"What a bore," said the doctor, "I suppose we have visitors."

A pretty flaxen-haired girl came forward to meet him as he entered, and held out her hand. She was small, and dimpled, and exceedingly fair, with a pair of blue eyes and a roguish smile which appealed instantly to his rather susceptible heart.

"You won't remember me, Dr. Morgan, for I was only a little girl last time I saw you, when I was staying with Uncle Harry. I am Gwenllian Rhys."

The doctor protested that he was not likely to forget such a pretty young lady, and introduced her to Louise instantly as the niece of his oldest friend and neighbour, Sir Harry Gwyn.

"And this is his nephew, young Harry Gwyn," he said, shaking hands with a broad-shouldered young man who now advanced to greet him. "I must introduce him also to my new tenant, who is another old friend, Mrs. Owen. A Welsh name,

but no justification for it that we can discover. Still it should make her feel more at home among us."

Young Harry was flaxen-haired like his cousin, with a brick-red healthy complexion, and a small bleached moustache.

He was a smart active young soldier, proud of a temporary appointment on the staff of a distinguished relative commanding a district in the West of England. His fair colouring and shy manner made him appear younger than his age. Louise, regarding him as a boy, greeted his bow with a smile almost motherly in its kindness, which caused him to liken her in his own mind to a picture of the Madonna in his uncle's gallery at Morlais.

Louise owed a marked improvement in her appearance to the anxious counsels of the doctor's wife, who almost wept over her friend's carelessness of her natural advantages.

"That beautiful hair, so thick and so long that it almost reaches her knees," she had said to the doctor in horror, "and she strains it off her face, and screws it up, in a tight little bunch! and the fit of that musty crape dress!"

"Well my dear, you take her in hand," Dr. Morgan had answered. "Nobody knows better than you do how to make the best of a woman. You have practised on yourself and the girls for years."

It was a joy to Mrs. Morgan to take Louise in hand; since both her daughters were married; and since, after the manner of daughters, they greatly preferred their own taste to their mother's judgment.

Louise submitted patiently to her friend's dictates; she allowed her abundant tresses to be parted loosely above her low wide brow, and coiled in the nape of her neck, and permitted the fashion of her gowns to be altered.

Nor had she the slightest suspicion when she paid the very moderate bill presented by the dress-maker in the neighbouring town, that her kind friend had made a secret compact whereby the greater portion of the sum due was placed to her own account.

Mrs. Morgan would not herself have worn a gown made in Llandandras; but then, as she told her husband, at her age she needed far more careful dressing than Louise, whose grand proportions looked best in the plainest clothes. She added that it was marvellous to observe what could be done by a local dressmaker under careful supervision.

So there was nothing to mar, and everything to enhance, the beauty of Mrs. Owen, as she stood framed in the opening of the long window, against the creepers which wreathed the light posts of the verandah, with the distant blue of the hills to form a background for her stately figure and noble head.

Gwenllian Rhys gazed at her frankly as at an apparition. Young Harry after that one startled glance did not turn towards her again; but the doctor had caught the look upon his face.

Louise was so humble, so unconscious, that her beauty was apt to lose its effect upon those about her. Mrs. Morgan had quickly grown indifferent to it—was satisfied with acknowledging her good looks, and regretting that she had no idea how to

make the most of herself. But her appreciation of Louise was immediately quickened when she noted the admiration of her visitors.

"Do you think that lady would sit to me?" said Gwenllian, with the calm directness of twentieth century girlhood, to her hostess, whom she had never met before: but her extreme prettiness and youth lent a certain piquancy to her independence. "I'd give anything to get her for a model while I am down here, instead of wasting my time. You know I'm an artist."

"I did *not* know, but I'm sure she'd be only too pleased. She has nothing to do from morning till night," said Mrs. Morgan, without intending to say so much; but the entire self-possession of her young visitor somehow flurried her. "I am sure she would do anything to please anybody if—dear me—I forgot. She is in deep mourning."

Miss Rhys opened her blue eyes.

"Well, it wouldn't be infringing any law of etiquette, would it? I should have thought it was one of the few things one *could* do, in deep mourning,—to sit for one's portrait," she said smiling frankly. "I would only make a sketch of her. But perhaps we'd better call on her, mamma and I, before I ask her. She's staying here, isn't she? somewhere in the village?"

"At the Hafod,—our cottage—at the bottom of the garden," murmured Mrs. Morgan.

The doctor was making enquiries after his old friend.

"How is Sir Harry? I was coming over, for I have n't seen him about for the last day or two."

"He's not quite the thing; and he thought per-

haps you'd take pity on him, and go across and dine to-night without ceremony. My aunt is away," said young Harry, with a half apologetic glance towards Mrs. Morgan.

"I'll come by all means, if only to have a look at him," said the doctor. "You don't mean he's ill?"

"No no, only a bit off colour. A cold. He got wet through driving in that thunder-storm a day or two ago. Of course he had n't an overcoat. You know how Uncle Harry despises weather. I suppose he caught a chill."

"Do come," said Gwenllian, smiling at the doctor; "Harry and I can do nothing with him. I wanted to take his temperature, and he nearly snapped my head off. You know what a man is like if he only has a finger-ache. I do really think he feels rather seedy, and as he's never ill he can't understand it." She turned with pretty apology to Mrs. Morgan. "You won't mind? He imagines he can't entertain a lady without mamma. He does n't count me. Harry and I are mere children. We're often surprised we're allowed to dine late at all, and not sent up to the old schoolroom where we used to have our meals."

"Not so long ago," said the doctor, laughing.

"Oh, a very long time ago," she said seriously. "Neither Harry nor I are so young as we look. He is twenty-three and I am in my twentieth year, and I came out at seventeen."

"I will come," said the doctor, "Mrs. Owen will keep my wife company, eh, Mary?"

"Oh, we shall be very happy together," said Mrs. Morgan, looking affectionately at Louise.

The cousins made their farewells, and departed almost as soon as this was settled, and the object of their visit accomplished; for they were walking, and though young Harry was well acquainted with all the short cuts down the hills, and through the opposite woods to the Castle, yet the river had to be crossed, and the bridge was nearly a mile lower down the valley.

"She is the daughter of Lady Cadoc, Sir Harry's sister," Mrs. Morgan explained to Louise, "*such* a nice creature—I mean the mother. She has been over here several times lately—but she is away just now. She and her daughter are paying Sir Harry a long visit. I am very fond of her. She is a charming woman—gives herself no airs."

"Why should she give herself airs? She is a very tiresome woman," said the doctor, impatiently.

"Well, dear, people *do*," said Mrs. Morgan, vaguely.

"Sir Harry is the owner of the great house on the other side of the valley?" asked Louise, though she was well aware of the fact; but she thought Mrs. Morgan's white brow looked ruffled.

"Yes, and this young man is his brother's son—and his heir."

"Has he no children?"

"One daughter," said the doctor, rather shortly. "I'll go and order the dog-cart, Mary."

"Do, dear," said his wife, as he left the room.

Louise questioned Mrs. Morgan with her eyes.

"Yes, there is a story about the daughter," said Mrs. Morgan, settling down with great enjoyment to tell it. "But Lewis never will talk about it, because it's a point on which he and Sir Harry don't

agree. He thinks Sir Harry ought to forgive Margaret, but I must say there is something to be said on the other side."

"What did Margaret do?"

"She fell in love with her father's agent—a young man named Howel Rosser. I saw him once. He was certainly good-looking. A slim straight active young fellow with dark eyes and curly hair. The sort of man, my dear, whom any *woman* would have had the sense not to engage, with a marriageable daughter about. But Sir Harry did as he chose. You'll see for yourself when you meet him that he is n't the sort of a man to take advice. Of course Lewis won't hear a word against him, but *I* never could see why the people about think so much of him. No doubt he was a very fine soldier and all that, in his time, but there it is. He is too impetuous for me. A regular fiery Welshman. But unluckily Howel Rosser was a fiery Welshman too, though he was dark and Sir Harry is red—with those very blue eyes like young Harry—I don't know if you noticed them?" said Mrs. Morgan, enjoying her own inconsequence to the full, in the absence of her spouse, who was apt to interrupt and bring her back to the point of her rambling discourse. "However the old man would make two of young Harry, and though he's close upon sixty thinks nothing of a twenty mile walk. Well—Margaret wanted to marry Rosser, and Sir Harry had a furious scene with him, and discharged him, and the next thing was that without a word, she went straight to her lover and married him. Ah, my dear, until one has children of one's own, one never realises how ungrateful they *can* be."

But Louise had already listened more than once to confidences on the subject of her friend's married daughters, and their extraordinary independence of character. She gently recalled Mrs. Morgan's attention to the subject in hand.

"It must have been a blow to her parents."

"I can feel for them. Their only child, and ready to fly at the first word from a young man, no matter if he has n't a penny in the world: that is what comes of all one's care and planning." Mrs. Morgan shook her carefully dressed head, and her grey eyes and long nose reddened slightly with suppressed emotion.

"And he never forgave her?"

"That is the dreadful part of the story. Mind, I don't say poor Margaret is to blame, for how could she foresee the result? But I do think poor Sir Harry's feeling very natural, though Lewis does n't. You see he adored his wife; one of those *grandes passions* which one reads about and never sees. And the shock of Margaret's elopement killed her. Yes, literally, for the news was brought to her suddenly—and she fell down, dead. It was a tragedy. A dreadful tragedy. She had heart disease, though no one knew it. I always think that kind of death so terrible. No time to prepare—nothing. How pale you are! Am I tiring you, dear?"

"No, no," said Louise. "I am very much interested. Please go on."

"Have a cushion. No? A foot-stool? There! I am sure you walk too far," said Mrs. Morgan. "Well, to return to poor Lady Gwyn. Yes. She dropped down dead, and of course the shock to

Sir Harry was beyond words. Though there is this to be said, for I always look on *both* sides, dear," said Mrs. Morgan, with cheerful unconsciousness, "that a sudden death saves a great deal of trouble and anxiety for those who are left behind. And even expense," she added thoughtfully, "not that that mattered, of course, in Sir Harry's case, for he is a rich man."

Louise realised suddenly how well the doctor knew his wife; though he would have been astonished to learn that he had betrayed his knowledge. She saw again his tender smile; half sad, and half amused.

"That was, let me see—ten years ago," said Mrs. Morgan. "Sir Harry has shut himself up at Morlais ever since. Resigned his seat in Parliament, where everyone thought he was going to do such great things, and sold his London house. I believe Margaret tried to see him, but I don't know much about it, because, as I say, Lewis won't talk of it. It was a great grief to him, for he was fond of Margaret, and he admired Lady Gwyn who was a very beautiful woman. There is a portrait of her in the hall at Morlais, which is exactly what I remember her, though of course I never knew them well, as Lewis did."

"Poor Margaret," sighed Louise.

"Yes, that is what Lewis says, but you see, being a mother, *I* see both sides of the question," said Mrs. Morgan, with the air of one who utters a conclusive argument. "Besides you need not pity her, for she is very well off. People used to say the saddest part of the tragedy was that she became a rich woman through her mother's death. Lady

Gwyn was an heiress, and the larger part of her fortune went direct to her daughter. So the young couple went out to the Argentine, and bought a large property—and Rosser speculated in railways and things, and is said to have made a great deal of money. My boy, who is out there, thinks him a fine fellow, and is devoted to them both; he says Rosser is very clever and hard-working, and will be a distinguished man. Anyway they are quite independent of Sir Harry. Personally I don't believe he can ever have cared much for his child. Her mother nearly died when she was born, and it was a disappointment to both of them that she wasn't a boy, of course. So now you know the whole story, but better not say I told you. Let Lewis give you *his* version, which he is sure to do sooner or later," said Mrs. Morgan, for she loved a little mystery.

They dined together, in the pretty red-walled dining-room, hung round with a collection of rare prints which were the delight of Dr. Morgan's heart.

Louise enjoyed the daintiness of the meal and its surroundings, and dwelt with pleasure upon the picture presented by her hostess in the rose-shaded light of the electric lamps, recently installed; for Dr. Morgan's energy had not failed to turn to account the waterfall that rushed through the decline beside his house.

Mrs. Morgan wore lavender silk and point lace, and her beautiful snow-white hair was dressed high *à la Marquise*, and ornamented with a knot of violet velvet.

The touch of self-consciousness never wholly absent from her personality, was not out of keeping with the somewhat artificial prettiness of her aspect.

"You look charming, my dear, and it is a pity you are not coming over to Morlais," the doctor said, before he started; for he seldom failed to say the thing expected of him, and knew exactly how to bring a smile to his wife's lips.

"Oh Lewis! This old gown! I am sure I have had it for years," she replied.

He said nothing to Louise, who stood like a dark statue in the background, a silent witness of the parting embrace between husband and wife.

She had never known the language of compliment, nor of jesting, nor of affectionate gallantry; and it was as strange to her, as was this atmosphere of ease and cheerfulness and luxury. She stood in the shadow, half fearing—with the timidity natural to her, to be intrusive—yet half aware, by feminine subtlety of intuition, that he was acutely conscious of her presence, though he barely touched her hand as he bade her good-night, and thanked her for staying to keep his wife company.

When he was gone, there was a certain blank; but the novelty of the situation helped to efface it, for Louise had not yet dined at Brach-y-Gwynt, nor spent an evening there.

Mrs. Morgan had deemed the widow's mourning too deep for dinner invitations, and not all the raillery of her husband had shaken her opinion.

"But to keep me company when I am *alone*—and not even going back to dress—just sending a message to old Mrs. Jones—that is a very different

thing," she explained to him, though she took especial pains to array herself for the admiration of her guest.

After dinner Mrs. Morgan took up a society journal and read a few paragraphs aloud to Louise, who as a Londoner, was familiar with many of the names mentioned, and could even supply the missing details of a scandal mysteriously outlined, though her honesty pretended to no such acquaintance with those concerned as Mrs. Morgan could have wished.

"Our landlord's wife was a ladies' maid," she explained, "and her niece is in service with the Alcumunds, and told her all about it, and she told us."

"Indeed, how very curious. I should have heard all about it myself, from heaps of people who know *them*, if I had been at home, I mean in London," she corrected herself rather mournfully. "There is no denying one gets a little out of it down here; though now we have got everything in order we can begin to have people to stay with us. Still, that's not like being in the swim oneself. However, the doctor thinks we may be able to manage a flat, to run up to from time to time. I rather fancy the North side of the Park. What do you think?"

She prattled happily on till half past nine, when they were both startled by the sound of wheels on the drive, and the barking of the dogs.

"Lewis can't be back already," exclaimed Mrs. Morgan, as soon as it was evident that he must be; since he opened the door and came into the room.

He was in such a hurry that he had not waited to remove his overcoat; and coming straight to Louise—who with his wife had risen in surprise and some alarm—he took both her hands in his own.

“You said you were ready for work, my dear,” he said. “Your opportunity has arisen suddenly and very urgently. Sir Harry Gwyn is dangerously ill—an acute attack of pleurisy. There is no one in the house who really understands anything of nursing. I left his man Griffiths in charge, and came over to fetch you. Will you come over and help us?”

“I can be ready in ten minutes. May I go across to the cottage and get what I want?”

“Do—I will send a servant to carry your bag, while I put together a few things for myself. And I’ll be at the bottom of the drive, at the corner of your lane, waiting in the dog-cart. Bring warm wraps and everything you are likely to want. You’ll be up all night and so shall I, but I’ll telegraph for a second nurse in the morning if it’s necessary.”

Then he turned to his wife.

“My dear, I must leave you. I’m very sorry, but it can’t be helped. I must spend the night there; but I’ll send or come round the first thing in the morning to let you know how he is.”

“Oh Lewis, is he very bad?”

“Yes, he’s very bad,” said the doctor. “A cold indeed! What fools people are! Come upstairs, Mary, and help me to find what I want.”

There was a white mist in the valley, and the

familiar features of the landscape were shrouded from the gaze of the doctor and his companion, as they drove rapidly along the road beside the river. The horse's hoofs clattered on the bridge, waking the echoes of the stone arches, above the noisy rushing of the waters over the weir.

After crossing the bridge they doubled back again towards the point they had left, but this time on the opposite side of the valley; and then stopped and the groom sprang down and opened the first gate of the dark avenue of giant yews.

The ascent to the Castle was long, steep, and winding, and Louise broke the silence.

"Will he mind my coming?"

"He would have minded if he could, but he was too ill to care," said the doctor. "I took it as a matter of course, and said that by great good luck, I had an excellent nurse close at hand, though not a regular professional. He did rouse himself to make a faint protest; but I drew such an unromantic portrait of you that he was reassured"—the doctor laughed grimly. "I said you were a steady capable middle-aged woman who would give yourself no airs, and would do just as I bid you."

"Well—that was all true," Louise said, with a soft subdued laugh. Then she murmured, hardly above her breath,

"It is curious that it should be—the same illness ——"

He half turned towards her. "Will that make it too painful for you? I'm afraid I thought of nothing but the relief to him—and of my own anxiety."

"No, no. It will make it easier—far less nervous

work for me—it will be all so familiar,” she said huskily. “Only I hope it will end differently.”

“Pray God it may,” he said gently. “There are no complications here, you know. He is a hale and hearty man, with a fine constitution, though of course at his age an attack of the kind is serious. He is ten years my senior. I don’t think anyone would believe it to look at us now.”

“He is a great friend of yours?” Louise asked.

“I don’t suppose he knows himself what store I’ve always set by his friendship,” said the doctor, frankly, “and yet—perhaps he does, for he was very kind to me when I was a little chap. You know how a little lad of twelve looks up to a fine young fellow of two and twenty. I used to follow him about—carry his fishing-rod—bowl for him at the nets, or when he got a better bowler, content myself with fielding the ball; any mortal thing to be near him—you know what a boy’s hero-worship can be. I nearly broke my heart, unbeknown to anyone, of course, when he was sent off to China. Naturally he was a soldier. He saw a good deal of active service—was in the Ashanti expedition and the Kaffir and Zulu wars, where he got his V.C. He was a Lieutenant-Colonel and a K.C.B. when he retired, and I don’t believe he *would* have retired if it had n’t been for his wife. I believe he has regretted it ever since. However he went into Parliament—and her death cut short his career there too. For the last ten years he has done nothing—I don’t suppose he’ll ever do anything again.”

“Surely—it is a good deal to show for one life,” Louise said wistfully.

"Not when you take the native energy of the man into account. Still, I must not do him injustice. If his influence has been confined to a much narrower circle, it has not been altogether wasted. He is very much loved and esteemed in his own county and would be greatly missed by his neighbours. And if he is lost to the public, why, I suppose there are a few gainers, himself included; for he has leisure for sport and for his books, and has preserved his activity in a manner impossible to those who dwell in cities."

"What was his wife like?" Louise asked with interest.

"Handsome enough. Yes, yes, to do her justice, a beautiful woman; an idol who sat still to be worshipped. I thought her cold and selfish. That child of hers, poor little Margaret, seemed always to have a sad look in her eyes—perhaps she was chilled, I have often thought so—as I was, by that passionless perfection. But he never seemed to find it out, which was curious in so quick a man. Perhaps it was her very impassiveness, her dignity and reserve—that charmed him. He thought her perfect, and in a manner I suppose she was perfect. She smiled, and looked wise, and was beautiful and said little. Where there is mystery the imaginative are apt to perceive hidden depths. Sir Harry is imaginative. I think he will never grow old. There is something of the simplicity, and the egoism, the wilfulness and the appeal of boyhood in him still. He is often unreasonable and always lovable. But his wife's death changed him very much," said the doctor with a sigh.

Owing to the steepness of the approach, they

had been obliged to proceed at a foot's pace, which favoured conversation; but now there came a halt, the groom opened a second gate, and they reached the stretch of level table-land on which the Castle was built.

"We are nearly there," said the doctor. "You're not nervous?"

"Not very," said Louise, but her heart beat faster than usual. "Tell me now if you have any particular warnings or directions to give me."

"I know too well what you are like in a sick-room to think warnings necessary," he said kindly. "Only take your being there as a matter of course, make no apologies, and put on a white apron to make yourself look as business-like as you can. If you were any other woman I should advise you to speak as little as possible, but that again is a warning *you* don't need," he added, humorously. "Come, here we are."

The dog-cart stopped before a dark mass of buildings, and a door beneath a great stone archway was thrown open.

The groom went to the horse's head, and the doctor after assisting Louise to descend, himself took out her leather bag, and handed it to the butler.

They passed through a low entrance-chamber of arched stone, supported by heavy Norman pillars, and lighted by a solitary lantern suspended from an iron hook in the roof.

Nail-studded doors opened into a great banquet-hall, partially panelled, with two open fire-places beneath mantels of curiously carven stone.

There was a musician's gallery at the further end of the hall, and low doorways were sunk beneath rounded arches, of which the lowest led to a disused chapel.

An ancient table, forty feet long, fashioned from a single mighty oak, occupied the centre of the hall, which was considerably more than double that length.

Louise glanced curiously about her as she followed the doctor up a narrow winding staircase of stone, so solid that it appeared almost as though it had been hewn out of the massive walls which enclosed it.

In the gallery above Gwenllian Rhys met them, hovering round her uncle's door, with blue eyes wide and anxious, beneath soft masses of flaxen hair.

She looked very small and delicate, and even more childish in her pretty evening frock than in her severe walking dress and hat.

"Oh, Dr. Morgan, I am so glad you have come back again. Uncle Harry is worse. He is delirious. Of course I've not been in as he said I was n't to, but Griffiths came to the door and told me. He is so frightened."

"Take Mrs. Owen to the room I asked you to get ready for her, and let her take off her bonnet," said the doctor. "There's nothing to be frightened about, my child. Mrs. Owen will be with him all night and so shall I. Griffiths will have no further responsibility, and the best thing you can do is to go to bed."

He disappeared into the sick-room, and Gwenllian, pouting a little, hurried Louise along a corridor

dimly lighted at intervals by small oil lamps placed in niches of the stone walls.

"This is rather a ghostly house, so I put you in this room, next to mine," she said, "I did not know you were a nurse when I saw you this afternoon. It must be so delightful to have a profession. And nursing, after all, is the finest profession a woman can have. Where were you trained? I have a sister who wanted to be a nurse, but however, she got married instead."

Louise explained briefly, not pausing for a moment in her preparations.

"Oh!" Gwennlian said. "Well, it is very noble of you to wish to devote yourself to it. I should hate to be always with sick people, but it is difficult to know what to do with one's life. I want to be an artist, and yet I sometimes have doubts as to the wisdom of multiplying mediocre pictures——" she broke off with a sigh, "whereas you can have *no* doubts. Whatever is, or is n't right in this world,—the sick *must* be nursed," said the little philosopher of nineteen.

Louise was half amused, half troubled by her chatter.

She unpacked her bag and drew out one of the white overalls she had been accustomed to wear in attendance upon her husband. A thousand memories rushed over her as she put it on, and made up a little parcel of necessaries for a long night watch; a shabby travelling clock, a small spirit lamp and saucepan for tea-making, and a few other trifles.

"Won't you mind sitting up all night?"

"I am used to it. But the doctor will probably

insist on a second nurse if there is much night work. He will see to-morrow. May I come now? I am quite ready."

She took her parcel in one hand, and a lighted candle in the other, and followed Gwenllian, who led the way back to her uncle's door.

"You'll send for me if I can do *anything*, won't you?" she whispered, imploringly. "You know where to find me?"

"I will indeed," said Louise, and her soft dark eyes looked with sincerity down into the appealing blue ones.

She held the candle aloft for a moment until Gwenllian had returned from the semi-obscurity of the passage, to the light of the lamp at the head of the stairs—and then she entered the sick-room and closed the door.

Gwenllian was a little disconsolate, and yet mollified by the gentleness of the interloper, as she felt Mrs. Owen in some sense to be.

Instead of returning to her room, she hastened down the echoing stair, and across the empty and silent banqueting hall, to the library, which was exactly opposite the low entrance to the old chapel, but belonged to a later period.

Here a fire of logs blazed on the open hearth, for even in May, the air was chilly on these heights, and in this great stone building.

A green-shaded lamp stood on a table beside a leather elbow-chair, where sat Harry Gwyn the younger reading the newspaper, which he threw down as his cousin entered.

"Well," he said, springing to his feet, "has she come?"

"They've both come. The doctor came back with her, and she's not a professional trained nurse. Only devoted herself for years to nursing her sick husband, and *he* died of pleurisy. And she's going to make nursing her life-work."

"Very lucky she was here and able to come," said Harry, and he kicked a burning log into place among the wood ashes, which sent forth a shower of sparks.

"Take care," said Gwennllian, drawing aside her white chiffon draperies. "Yes, of course it was lucky. I can't say I've an extraordinary turn for nursing. Still it was pretty rotten of Uncle Harry to snub me quite so viciously before Griffiths and everybody when I offered my poor little services."

"He was too ill to know what he was saying, poor fellow," said Harry, apologetically, "I know exactly what to do for him myself, for that matter, I've seen chaps down with pneumonia before now. But I saw he was in the mood when offers of help would simply aggravate him, so I left him to stew in his own gravy, and bunked. After all, he'd seen old Morgan."

"It's lucky we've got him," said Gwennllian. "I'm sure Uncle Harry would never have stood poor Dr. Clode. He drove by us last week as tipsy as a man could be."

"I suppose we ought to have seen *how* bad the old boy was this afternoon," said Harry, gloomily. "I *did* think he looked pretty queer."

"What can one do if a man won't let one so much as take his temperature," said Gwennllian. "I got my clinical thermometer out of my dressing bag. The doctors have nothing else to go by them-

selves, let them say what they will, but he glared at me like a tiger. Oh, Harry! I wish you had seen Mrs. Owen just now,"—Gwenllian clasped her hands in a sudden burst of artistic rapture,—“turning to smile at me before she vanished into the ogre’s den; she stood there lifting one arm, with the candle in her hand to light my steps. Oh, the lines and the curves, and the turn of her beautiful long neck. And that meek head with its heavy raven hair parted. What a shame to waste her on nursing. She would be a perfect artist’s model. If I could only have drawn her as she stood there! But I know by experience what my drawing would have been like when I *had* done it,” said the poor little artist, despairingly, “and you know too.”

“I dare say you’ll improve no end when you’ve had a bit more practice,” said honest Harry, in consoling tones.

CHAPTER V

THE sick man lay motionless among his pillows, for the pain he suffered was too acute to permit of movement. His pulse was rapid, his skin burning, and his short hard breathing painfully audible.

The fever ran high during the earlier hours of the night, when his few muttered words were incoherent enough to justify Griffiths' terrified announcement that his master's senses were gone; but as dawn broke, the doctor's ministrations appeared to afford some relief; the temperature lowered slightly, and all signs of delirium ceased.

Louise was conscious of receiving more than one piercing glance from glittering blue eyes beneath shaggy grey eyebrows. But all interest in the man was merged in anxiety for the patient. She perceived that the doctor thought badly of him, and was alarmed by the excess of fever.

Sir Harry's servant, Griffiths, remained on guard in the passage all night, ready to bring anything that was called for with the least possible delay.

He was a small spare man, with a military figure, and a quiet alertness of manner, and he had known Dr. Morgan all his life.

"You must get some rest, sir," he said, startled by the pallor of the doctor's face in the grey light of the dawn, when he answered the summons of opening door and beckoning finger.

"Yes," said the doctor. "I am going to take an hour or two now. I want to lie down in the next room, within call of Mrs. Owen. But the communicating door is locked. Can you unlock it on the other side? The room's empty, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Beg pardon, sir, it was my poor lady's room," said Griffiths, in a hesitating whisper. "It's never been used since ——"

"It will be used now," said the doctor, peremptorily, for he was unused to meet with opposition. "Go round and see if you can unlock the door—without a sound, if possible."

Griffiths obeyed.

The door was concealed from the patient's view by a heavy screen. Dr. Morgan stepped behind the screen and waited.

There was the sound of an opening shutter within, and then the key was noiselessly turned.

The doctor entered a large bedroom, redolent of the mustiness which gathers about a room long disused. He cast a rapid glance round.

The walls were hung with tapestry, and the heavily carved and ornamented furniture was of a dark and sombre order.

A great Elizabethan four-poster with the date yet faintly visible in raised letters upon the solid head-board, stood on a dais, approached by two black oaken steps.

His eye fell on a roomy couch next the stone carvings of the open fireplace.

"Bring a pillow and a couple of blankets. I'll rest there," he said, pointing to the sofa. "Don't attempt to make any other preparations."

"Very good, sir," said Griffiths, and murmured

apologetically, "After all, there's no other room near him—this being in the tower."

The doctor vouchsafed no answer, but returned to the sick-room, and signed to Louise to follow him round the screen.

"You are not fit to go without sleep," she said, anxiously.

"I'm afraid not," he said simply. "But an hour or two will make all the difference. You know exactly what to do, and you'll know I can come at any moment if you call me. You're all right, my dear?"

The solicitude of his tone said more than the words.

"Yes, yes. I am going to make myself a cup of tea now, with my little old spirit lamp. It would be a relief to me to think you were sleeping, and you may trust me to call you if there is any change."

He nodded, and she left him; returning to the sick-room and half closing the door.

A hoarse sound indicated that Sir Harry was trying to speak, and she came quietly to the bedside, anticipating his question.

"The doctor? He has gone to sleep in the next room for an hour, within call if you want him," she said, softly.

"Don't wake him," said Sir Harry, and groaned.

The pain was terribly severe. Louise forgot her tea in applying the remedies ordered, and anxiously watching the results. They took effect, for an hour later he fell into a feverish doze, and lay sleeping, though still moaning uneasily at intervals.

She made tea again, drank it, and was refreshed.

Daylight grew, and revealed the small proportions and plain furnishing of the room.

Sir Harry lay on a low iron bedstead facing the high narrow windows which pierced the wall of the tower.

In the morning light she perceived that the crest of thick grey hair above his broad brow, yet showed streaks of coppery red amid the silver; as the glowing embers of a dying fire linger among the pale ashes. The fierce eyebrows met above the high bridge of an aquiline nose; the chin below the heavy grizzled moustache was square and cleft.

"A splendid head—but rather grim," she thought.

On his right hand were bookshelves filled with well-worn volumes; on his left a small reading lamp on an adjustable stand.

His dressing appointments were of the simplest. There were neither blinds nor curtains to the windows; but Griffiths brought a light screen which she placed at the foot of the bed to shade him as he slept; if such restless dozing could be called sleep.

Fearing to disturb him, she withdrew from his immediate vicinity, and took up her post beside the nearest window.

Through the deep embrasure she looked down upon the cold white morning mist which shrouded the valley, marking the course of the river through the country.

Presently the sun rose, and shining gloriously, dispersed the mists, and flooded hills and valley alike.

She looked across at the doctor's white house, conspicuously placed on the green hill-side opposite;

facing south-east, it caught the full glory of the early sunshine.

Her own little cot lay lower, and looked humble, indeed, from this majestic height. Towards the east lay a finer and wilder prospect of mountain scenery than was visible from her garden slope; and the hills, overlapping each other, stretched westward, bearing on their mighty swelling breasts, the little homes of the poor: white-washed cottages, and lonely stone-built farms.

The doctor, restored by sleep, returned to his post, and accepted the fresh tea she offered with a smile of gratitude and reassurance; though his smile died as he examined his patient and marked the progress of the fever.

They held a moment's conference in the adjoining room, while he took the tea she brought him.

"I shall wire for a second nurse this morning."

"I can go on—I was accustomed to do with very little sleep for so many years."

"I know. You are wonderful. But I won't let you do it now for all that. I shall wire to John Willand and tell him there is a possibility of my sending for him. Not that he can do any good, but for the satisfaction of everybody in a case like this, it's desirable to have the best advice in the world; and there is no better man than he is. Now go and rest yourself, my dear."

"There is no need," Louise said. "I will take an hour off for bath and breakfast, and come back. You must go down to the others—the poor little niece."

"I suppose his sister ought to be sent for," said the doctor. "She will be a great nuisance."

Louise went away, and the doctor stood beside Sir Harry's bed, looking down upon his patient.

Sir Harry opened his eyes and spoke faintly in a hoarse whisper.

"I'm pretty bad, I suppose, Morgan."

"You're very ill; but by God's grace, we'll pull you through, if you'll fight with us and not against us," said the doctor, deftly seizing his opportunity.

"All right, I put myself in your hands," Sir Harry muttered. "Never been ill in my life like this;—feel confused."

"That's the fever. Don't talk, and don't trouble about anything."

"I won't, if you'll send Griffiths—one moment," gasped Sir Harry, scarcely able to make himself audible by reason of his exceeding hoarseness.

The doctor called Griffiths immediately, and the servant stood impassive by his master's side, but with eyes alert and intelligent.

"Griffiths."

"Yes, Sir Harry."

"Take your orders from the doctor."

"Very good, Sir Harry."

"Tell the others the same. That will do."

Griffiths went out.

"Now you can do what you like," groaned the sick man; and the sharpness of the pain he was suffering made him close his eyes and turn his head from the light.

On the third day of Sir Harry's illness, the great doctor from London came down to Morlais, and confirmed Dr. Morgan's treatment; and a second nurse was installed.

Louise took a dislike to her, which subsequent experience only strengthened. She thought her careless in her methods, and flippant in her manner of speaking of the patient. But she was obliged to leave her in charge of Sir Harry, and after forty-eight hours' continuous nursing went off to her much needed rest with the sensations of a mother deprived of her child; a feeling known to all nurses who become absorbed in a "case." But her head had scarcely touched the pillow before she dropped into a dreamless slumber which lasted nine hours.

She woke, bathed herself, and dressed; and then, as she had not ordered her breakfast until eight, and was not to be on duty again till nine, she went quietly down-stairs, and asked a surprised and yawning housemaid to show her the way into the garden.

There was a sheltered enclosure, forming but a small portion of the *plateau* whereon the Castle stood,—which lay between the walls of the building, and the mountain-rock behind it.

The long shadows of early morning fell across its formal *parterres* and straight gravel paths, from the tall yew hedges of its eastern boundary.

In the middle a little fountain played, and an old stone bench stood beneath a mighty peacock-clipped yew, on grass yet wet with dew.

The pinks, newly blown, in drifts of white, ran along the edges of the grass, and the forget-me-nots, disconsolate, shed their petals of April blue, giving place to the heavy snapdragon making ready to thrust forth hardy heads.

A white banksia climbed the face of the rock,

from which a baby waterfall tumbled into a natural hollow, and found its way into the moss-grown basin of the fountain. On the heights above, early rhododendrons bloomed in rich array of crimson colour. Everywhere was the bud and blossom of flowering May.

Louise looked up with awe at the massive masonry of the fortress. It was built of mighty blocks of stone, that might have been hewn from the solid rock which at once sheltered it, and formed its foundation. She could not help thinking of the long-dead women who must have planned and loved this ancient warmly walled garden; so safely hidden and guarded from the outside world.

She wore one of the long white linen overalls, in which, for convenience sake, she had usually attended her husband's sick bed. It was belted at the waist, and almost entirely covered her black gown, while her collar and cuffs were of severely plain white cambric; save for her uncovered head she looked like a nursing sister as she paced slowly up and down the gravel path, enjoying every breath of the fragrant air, and smiling quite unconsciously and happily to herself, for her spirits were infected by the joyousness of the morning concert held by the birds among the lilacs and laburnums.

A young man in white flannels halted irresolutely at the side door of the Castle, and then came swiftly across the garden to meet her; his fair head and red sunburnt face shining in the brilliant light of the morning.

"I hope you're rested. I'm afraid you've had an awful time," he said, rather nervously.

Louise smiled to reassure him. "No, no, I love nursing. And I'm quite rested. I've had a long sleep," she said.

"The letters have come, I ventured to bring out yours."

"Are there any for me?" She looked curiously surprised.

Had she then no correspondents, this lonely, beautiful woman? young Harry thought.

"Only one letter," he hastened to say, and handed it to her.

"It is from my sister-in-law," she said, as though an explanation were necessary. She opened it at once. "She wants to come down and stay with me! How extraordinary!"

Young Harry could not help laughing.

"Why should it be so extraordinary?"

He thought of adding that the desire seemed to him a very natural one, but having paid her this compliment in imagination, he coloured, and refrained from uttering it aloud.

"You would think it extraordinary if you knew Anna," said Louise. "Oh dear, how very unfortunate! I do not like to say no, for it is the first time she ever asked me a favour, I think, in her life. She says she wants to get away from London, and she knows I have a spare room."

She looked at young Harry with doubt and trouble very plainly visible in her expression, and almost as though asking for his advice; which he, being young and confident, would have been quite ready to give even if the solution of the difficulty had been far less obvious.

"Why should you say no? Why not explain the

situation to her, and then let her come or not as she likes."

"Thank you. That would be the best way, I think," she said gratefully.

Young Harry walked by her side.

The raven head and the flaxen head were almost exactly on a level, seen together; but apart, Louise looked the taller, on account of her long draperies, her slenderness, and the arrangement of her hair; though her height did not in reality quite equal his.

He asked no questions concerning his uncle, partly because he had already received the morning bulletin from Griffiths, and partly because he had a loyal and sympathetic instinct which led him to try and divert her mind from the sick-room during this moment of relaxation.

"You've never been over to the Castle before, have you?" he asked, observing her interested glances at the building. "Curious old tower, isn't it?"

"Very—very. I was wondering what its date was."

"You must ask my uncle all questions of that kind," he confessed. "I'm shamefully ignorant. I know it is said to have been built originally by Henry Beaumont, Earl of Warwick, in 1099, and mostly destroyed by Gryffydd ap Rhys, Prince of South Wales, in eleven hundred and something. It was rebuilt by Hugh de Spencer in the reign of Edward the Second, but since then it has been besieged and restored heaven knows how many times. I believe only the entrance hall, and the old chapel remain of the Norman building, and some of the archways in the banqueting hall."

"I think you know a great deal about it. More than I shall be able to remember," she said smiling. "Please go on."

"That's every bit I do know. Except that it was defended against the Parliamentary troops, and that Cromwell's soldiers occupied it at one time. They've dug up cannon balls, and black jacks, and bits of armour, in the shrubbery,—you'll see them in the gallery. I expect if the old place were explored and excavated lots of rum things would come to light, but my uncle guards it jealously."

"Yes, it looks full of strange secret histories, and ghosts of the past. But one would be proud to belong to such a house."

"One is proud," he said, simply. "It seems to be something solid, coming down to us from those far-away times; standing firm on the grim old rock, while generation after generation pass through its halls and disappear."

Then the Englishman's horror of a genuine sentiment openly expressed, overwhelmed young Harry with confusion, and he hastened to change the subject.

"I hope you're going to breakfast with Gwenllian and me to-day?"

"No, no. I must go in at eight. I was to have a little tray in my room. What is the time?"

"I am afraid—it *is* eight," he said, reluctantly, showing his watch. "But do please let me tell them not to take the little tray. We keep very early hours here and we breakfast at eight. And here *is* Gwenllian."

The girl, fresh as a rose in her pretty pink cotton

summer gown, came flitting across the garden, and added her entreaties.

Louise gave way, and went with the cousins into the banqueting hall, where a square table was spread in a great recess, below the high mullioned windows which faced the garden enclosure.

The whole scene was new to her. The dignity of space and the grandeur of age pervaded the great hall, where the tall servants moved noiselessly, looking insignificant enough below that domed roof, sixty-five feet high; where grey stone angels bore shields of strange devices, and painted coats of arms were hung aloft.

Beneath the low archways swung doors of solid oak, half a foot thick; the mighty central staircase, obviously of a much later date than any other portion of the hall, measured twelve feet across the base, and was ornamented by a balustrade of wreathed columns, wrought with carven fruit and flowers.

The youthful host and hostess, though subdued by their perception of the gravity of their uncle's illness, could not disguise the pleasure and satisfaction afforded them by the company of Louise: their interest in her personality had grown during these days and nights of her residence at Morlais, though she had been altogether invisible so far as they were concerned. But the doctor had not been slow to sing her praises, and even the jealousy of Griffiths had been softened by her simplicity, and by her devotion to her work.

Gwenllian and young Harry vied with each other in plying her with attentions, and were half amused and half pleased by the docility with which she

accepted them, and the contrast afforded by her severe and sculptural beauty and the exceeding gentleness of her manner.

On her side, she found both young man and maiden pleasant to look upon in their fair fresh youth; well-dressed, well-bred, and full of kindness towards herself.

The breakfast table appeared to her luxurious, with its massive Georgian urn, dainty tea and coffee equipage, red roses and maidenhair fern, forced strawberries, and rows of silver dishes smoking upon the side.

Louise, curious and appreciative, observed these details with pleasure.

"If you have time, I'll take you up-stairs, and show you the haunted gallery after breakfast," said Gwenllian, "where one of Cromwell's soldiers murdered the sweetheart of a Royalist and was killed by his rival. Her skeleton was found at the foot of the old staircase to the tower where Uncle Harry sleeps, when some repairs were being made. But he would not have it disturbed, and it was put back again. The people say, no wonder she walks, since she was denied Christian burial."

"We don't know that. Her grave may have been consecrated," said Harry.

"Of course, being a man, you must be always spoiling a good story with corrections," said Gwenllian. "I can take you to that gallery, up the grand staircase, if you like, Mrs. Owen, there is a way round to your room."

"I should like it very much. But I must be punctual," said Louise.

"And then we sha'n't see you any more till to-

morrow morning, I suppose," said young Harry, discontentedly. "I say—you'll breakfast with us again, won't you?"

"If I may; it is a pleasant change," she said; and it appeared to them both that she coloured.

In fact Louise felt guilty, as she followed Gwennllian's light figure up the wide staircase, which branched on either side to the galleries.

Was it possible that she was actually enjoying herself? She whose life had been so bad, and her bereavement so recent; and who was besides, so well aware that her present patient was dangerously ill?

She felt she must be heartless indeed, and reproached herself bitterly. Yet how could she help the life springing up within her on this glorious morn of early summer; physically refreshed as she was by sleep; vigorous after her long holiday, interested in work for which she felt herself peculiarly fitted by nature and experience; and filled with an almost passionate determination to win this battle with death that was being waged over Sir Harry's bed.

At the thought she quickened her footsteps, and then, on the broad central landing—stopped; for the full-length portrait of a woman met her eyes, placed in a position which commanded the whole length of the great banqueting hall, and so life-like that her attention was immediately arrested.

"It is Aunt Alice," said Gwennllian, "poor Uncle Harry's dead wife."

The portrait was of a lady in mid-Victorian dress, leaning over a balcony, with roses in her hand, and her finely modelled arms and shoulders

bare. Her face was handsome, typically English in fairness of colouring, and placidity of expression. The large blue eyes looked forth with gaze serene beneath the smooth white forehead and smooth light hair. A little chaplet of blue flowers crowned the calm brow.

"That was done soon after her marriage," said Gwennlian, in subdued tones. "The story of her death is a sad one. Do you know it?"

"I have heard something of it," said Louise, hesitating. "Is there—a picture of her daughter?"

"There *was*," said Gwennlian, expressively.

The portrait was so unlike the tragic image Louise had formed in her own mind of the broken-hearted mother of Margaret, that she had to re-adjust her ideas, as she returned to the room next to Sir Harry's. Here the nurse, emerging wearily from the shelter of the great screen, met her.

"Well, I'm glad you've come. He's been like a bear. Nothing I do is right. Dr. Morgan *is* good to him. Fancy a man with *his* reputation devoting himself to one patient day and night like this."

"They are old friends."

"They must be. He slept on that sofa, and he looks so done up, too. Everyone says he only retired because of his health. I never nursed for him, but a friend of mine just swears by him. He tried to get her for this case, but she was engaged. He told me he couldn't get one of his regular nurses."

"What do you think of the patient this morning?"

The nurse pointed to the chart she held, and shrugged her shoulders.

"He's very bad," she said. "He's drowsy now, and the doctor is sitting by him. You need n't go in till he calls."

Louise occupied herself by re-reading her sister-in-law's letter. She found herself smiling over it, and felt that somehow she understood Anna better since she had contemplated her, so to speak, from a distance.

"I need hardly say I should n't put you to any expense. I can pay for my board and lodging," wrote Miss Owen, with the aggressive independence that characterised her, *"but I've got a reason for wishing to leave London for a short time, and mamma will just have to do without me. Mrs. Patterson will look after her, and she's sure to have callers. I shall be glad——"*

The last four words were scratched out; and Louise could not help wondering whether Anna had been about to write, *I shall be glad to see you*, and then, suspecting herself of flattery, had sternly suppressed the sentence.

The doctor called, and Louise returned to duty; but she snatched a moment in the course of the day to reply to Anna's letter; following young Harry's advice with scrupulous care.

CHAPTER VI

THIS was only the beginning of Sir Harry's illness.

On the eighth day his condition showed a marked improvement. The pain had gradually lessened, and the fever abated suddenly. He had scarcely spoken for several days save in delirium, when one morning he uttered his old friend's name hoarsely, but with evident intention.

The doctor was at his side in a moment.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Send that woman away," said Sir Harry.

"Which?"

"The short one. She gets on my nerves. Puts everything down in the wrong place, and talks to me as though I were a child or an imbecile. I don't mind the black-haired one. She understands without asking questions."

"I'll get rid of the other as soon as possible," said the doctor, soothingly.

"I'm better."

"Yes—thank God."

"Out of danger?"

The doctor hesitated, but the shaggy brows on the pillow drew together impatiently. He told the exact truth.

"If this improvement continues, yes. But you

must n't be disheartened if we have a few ups and downs before we're out of the wood. It's not quite time to holloa yet."

Sir Harry smiled faintly.

The doctor was so much gratified by the praise of his *protégée* that he could not refrain from telling Louise what Sir Harry had said; and again she felt the mother's sensation of triumph over the child who turns to her, and refuses the offices of a stranger.

Unfortunately the relapse feared by Dr. Morgan set in a day or two after the departure of the second nurse, and when everyone had begun to hope the worst was over. But the symptoms were less severe, though the patient, being weaker, was less able to sustain them.

He showed distress at the suggestion of a new nurse, and Louise, whose devotion was naturally increased by the knowledge of his preference, pleaded earnestly with the doctor.

"I have got back into training, and Griffiths helps me a great deal. He takes my place during my morning run in the garden, and my breakfast; and while you can be with Sir Harry during my afternoon sleep, I can manage perfectly."

The doctor gave way. Meanwhile Lady Cadoc returned, and proved herself the nuisance he had predicted. At first she showed signs of alarm that a good-looking widow who was not a regular nurse, should have been introduced into her brother's household; but when the doctor assured her that Mrs. Owen was to be paid for her services, her alarm subsided.

"If she is to be paid she becomes a professional

from that moment," she argued to Gwenllian, who displayed a profound contempt for her mother's fears. "I don't care if she has had a hospital training or not, she *is* professional. But to be placed under an obligation is a very different matter. Your uncle would not like it; and if he *did* like it,—heaven knows what would happen. But a paid nurse——"

"Two guineas a week does not lessen the obligation we are under, Mamma," said Gwenllian, impatiently.

"Yes it does, my dear. You may say what you like, but it *does*," persisted her mother. "So that is a load off my mind, and leaves me free to think of nothing but your dear uncle's illness. I am anxious enough about that."

Her anxiety for the sufferer manifested itself by constant loud whispering and tapping at the door of the sick-room, at inconvenient moments; waking the patient when he was asleep, and irritating him when he was awake; while her attentions to Louise, whose personality presently attracted her greatly—took the form of lengthy visits to her bedroom during the afternoon; thus shortening her precious hours of much-needed sleep.

But she was the soul of good nature, and it was difficult to repel her kindly meant advances; for Louise, as for the doctor, who declared that her never-ending suggestions would drive him mad.

"Poor dear Lewis Morgan. He forgets I knew him when he was a little boy; so that whatever other people may think of him *I* could never be impressed by his reputation," she remarked to Louise, seated placidly in the chintz-covered chair by the open

window. "Now don't you mind me, my dear, if you want to lie down and begin your rest. I sometimes think one can drop off more easily when people are talking. I often doze myself in the drawing-room while young Harry and Gwenllian are gabbling in that tiresome undertone young people are so fond of. So be sure and tell me if my chat disturbs you. You see it's a relief to me to exchange a word with someone who is of an age to listen and understand. Gwenllian is nothing of a companion to me; though I suppose that is natural under the circumstances. You have noticed her and young Harry? Nothing is settled yet, but we all wish it, and so it is evident do they. A pity they are cousins, but after all, one can't have everything one's own way. So I let my town house for the season and brought her here. What's the use of taking out a girl who is as good as engaged, and who says she hates society? But I'm afraid I am tiring you."

"I will rest directly. You see I like to undress and go to bed for my sleep," explained Louise. "It is more refreshing."

She was pale, and had dark circles beneath her great eyes, for the strain was beginning to tell even upon her splendid health; and sleeplessness sets a heavy seal upon the face of a woman no longer in her first youth.

But she stood patiently leaning against the column of her four-poster, because she hoped this waiting attitude would rid her the sooner of the unwelcome intruder upon her privacy.

But Lady Cadoc was impervious to hints.

She sat back in her chair with a smile on her

pleasant face, and her plump dimpled hands, laden with rings, folded across her waist. She was of large and powerful build, like her brother; but while he was lean and muscular in person, quick and irritable of disposition, she was stout and heavy, slow of understanding and amiable in temper.

"I should have thought you would have found that far more tiring. Dressing and undressing always fatigues me, though I have a maid to help me. If you would like Marie to help you, I am sure she would be quite delighted. I told Dr. Morgan so yesterday. I said he was working you much too hard, and that I would like of all things to take you for a daily drive. Of course poor Harry is inconsiderate, men always are; and he has never been ill in his life and has no idea how nursing knocks one up. It was a thousand pities he insisted on sending the other nurse away, though I know he could n't bear her; but she could have sat up at night, and really it can't much signify who is sitting up in the night, when one can hardly even see her face. But naturally it is very difficult for Dr. Morgan to be firm with my brother, who as I say knew him when he was a little boy. We all thought it a thousand pities he ever became a doctor at all, with that nice property, and we were so devoted to his father and mother. Quite unpretending countrified people, you know, and such nice neighbours. I should have liked to help Lewis Morgan in London very much, but really I felt I could *not* feel any confidence in a doctor I had known from a child, so I left it alone. However he got on so well that he did not need help in the

end, so it signifies less, and what we should do without him now I cannot think. It is providential he retired when he did. There is really nobody about here at all. I always make a point of going up to town directly I feel the least inclined to be ill. I think it such a mistake to be laid up in the country away from chemists and every convenience."

Happy in the sound of her own voice, and the possession of a sympathetic listener, she could have prattled on for hours, but that Gwenllian, who kept a stern watch upon her mother, pursued her remorselessly and led her away. Lady Cadoc complained bitterly to Mrs. Morgan, on her next visit to Brach-y-Gwynt, that she was never allowed to exchange a single word with that nice charming Mrs. Owen.

"She is exactly the kind of person I am looking out for as a companion, for Gwenllian will marry and then where shall I be? I am for ever telling Marie I could not bear to live alone. I don't think even Marie could object to Mrs. Owen. Do you think it could be managed; as you say she is so very badly off?"

"I should think it far far nicer for her than taking up nursing as a profession," Mrs. Morgan said warmly, for she was inclined to agree with every suggestion her visitor chose to make.

Though she lamented Sir Harry's illness sincerely, and her husband's continued absence still more,—Mrs. Morgan was not disposed to quarrel with the circumstances which brought so well-known a personage as Lady Cadoc as a constant visitor to her house. In her way the doctor's wife was a philosopher, who while she hoped much from

life, was contented to take what she could get.

Lady Cadoc had seldom or never found time to return her periodical calls in London, and only invited her occasionally to a tea-fight or an afternoon concert: but she was glad of her company now. The doctor observed his wife's delight in this sudden display of intimacy, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Poor Mary," he said to Louise, "it is impossible for her to estimate the hollowness of a friendship inspired entirely by boredom. She talks of finding a flat near Lady Cadoc's house, without realising in the least that a return to town would mean the immediate quenching of this new-born enthusiasm for her company."

"Why should it?" Louise asked, though she knew very well; but she also knew when the doctor desired to talk, and would not, by any premature display of her own understanding, baulk that desire.

"Why? How impossible to put such facts into words," he said good humouredly. "Because she lives in a little circle floating just above our little circle, though here and there it may touch occasionally. In the society to which Lady Cadoc belongs, one may be tolerated in spite of the fact that one has distinguished oneself in some profession, just as in the unfashionable world one is somebody *because* of that distinction."

Louise smiled.

"If my poor Mary had entered the charmed circle to which she has always aspired, and with which I am—professionally—so well acquainted," said the doctor, humorously, "she would yet be in it and never of it. It appears to me that women, though

undoubtedly more adaptable than men, are curiously slow to recognise their own limitations."

"I suppose it is by overlooking those—that they do adapt themselves more easily—" said Louise dreamily.

The doctor looked at her curiously, but her tone was so calm that he was convinced she had spoken generally.

"My dear, there are some women who are born—queens," he said, smiling, "and I have met them in almost every walk of life—but especially in the humblest."

This conversation took place during the short interval when Louise and the doctor had their afternoon tea together in the apartment adjacent to the sick-room, and while Sir Harry endured a daily visit from his sister.

Louise had learnt to look for the expression of relief upon her patient's face at her entry, and never kept him waiting for a moment beyond the appointed hour; and the instant she entered, he peremptorily sent Lady Cadoc away; nor did his sister dare to expostulate, for she feared her brother's frown as she feared nothing else on earth.

As Louise kept her vigil through the dark hours of the night, when the little fire burned low, and the shadows across the bed were strongest, she could not but be haunted by thoughts of the familiar past, nor deny herself the solace of tears at the recollection of sufferings now ended for ever.

They were essentially tears of pity rather than tears of sorrow.

Always, as the face of her dead husband rose

before her mental vision,—prematurely aged, with lines deeply graven of pain, of peevishness, and of that eternal discontent begotten of bodily and mental weakness—she asked herself, Was there anything more I could have done—was there anything?

Her conscience and her common-sense declared that there was nothing; but the tenderness of her heart caused her to doubt, and to torment herself with useless self-accusations, until she could almost imagine his reproachful eyes gazing upon her from the shadows.

Then a falling cinder, or a movement of the sick man, would dispel the illusion, and recall her to the present, so that she would turn with something like relief to perceive the outline of Sir Harry's broad brow and eagle features among the pillows; the knotted hand thrust impatiently through thick grey hair—a favourite gesture—a glitter of blue eyes set in cavernous hollows below overhanging grizzled brows.

He could not speak much, but she had an impression that only his illness prevented his talking to her, during his hours of wakefulness; for when he spoke, it was as though he knew and understood her, and not as a stranger.

His occasional betrayal of his dependence upon her, was her best reward for her untiring performance of her duties. When she returned to the sick-room he would ask for milk and soda, or to have his pillow shaken, and say "I was only waiting to ask till *you* came back, nurse."

He called her nurse, as the doctor always called her in his presence, and she grew to like the name, uttered in almost reverential tones.

Though he was impatient he was never ill-humoured, and no word of complaint regarding the pain she knew he suffered, ever passed his lips. Once he spoke to her of death, and she knew he was aware that he had been, and was even yet, within measurable distance of its approach.

It was then that she understood for the first time the doctor's reference to the boyishness of his old friend, a reference which at the time had caused her to smile; for she was aware that Sir Harry was sixty, and she had seen her husband die at fifty—an old man.

"I had always supposed I should n't mind—that nobody could mind death when the one they loved best had gone before them——" he gasped faintly. "But now the time has come—I *do* mind slipping away like this—I don't want to go if I can help it. I'll fight to the last, nurse, and you'll help me."

She saw tears glittering in his eyes, tears born of utter weakness and exhaustion as Louise well knew, and his confidence in her touched her to the quick.

"I don't believe the time has come yet, I don't indeed. And you sha'n't go if I can help it," she whispered, kneeling by him as a mother might, who consoled her child.

There was soothing in her gentle voice, hope and courage in the glance of her dark eyes; and healing, he thought, in the soft steady hands that ministered to him.

The next morning he apologised for his weakness with the simplicity of a boy; and her smile, at once tender and merry, established their friendship. Louise knew by instinct that Sir Harry would have met death face to face without flinching, but she un-

derstood also the pugnacious instinct in him which bade him fight for his life to the last gasp; and she told him he reminded her of the man in armour who took heaven by storm in the *Pilgrim's Progress*.

"It is odd you should say so, for that was my favourite character in the allegory. I used to be fond of the pictures when I was a child," he said eagerly.

Chance allusions showed her that the events of his boyhood dwelt vividly in his memory. He found it presently delightful to recall them to so sympathetic and interested a listener and at last, one day, he spoke to her of his wife.

"You are using the next room?" he asked, though he must have known it for many days.

"It could not be helped," she answered, a little embarrassed. "It was almost a necessity."

"It is quite right," Sir Harry said, quietly; and then he asked Louise if she knew the portrait on the staircase.

She mentioned the fact to the doctor without any idea that she was betraying Sir Harry's confidence, and was surprised by his startled exclamation.

"He has spoken of her—and to you. That is curious. He has never mentioned her name to any of us since her death. I thought it strange for one so impetuous and outspoken by nature—but it shows perhaps, the depths of a sorrow that wrought such a change." Then he said earnestly, "My dear child, if you see your way, if you have a chance—you have too much tact to speak unless you felt it possible your words would do good—use your influence to obtain forgiveness for poor Margaret."

He told her the story which Mrs. Morgan had already related, but with more detail, and infinitely more sympathy for all those concerned in the tragedy of Lady Gwyn's sudden death.

Louise listened and said little, but the doctor knew, from her few words, that she would do what she could.

In the meantime she received a reply from her sister-in-law, not a gracious one, for Anna knew not how to be gracious, but to the effect that her offer of hospitality was accepted.

"I am sure I am only too glad you should occupy your time so usefully as to nurse any old man, and I should say the same if he were the blacksmith," wrote Anna, evidently alarmed lest Louise should suspect her of being impressed by the importance of Sir Harry's position. "I suppose you will be able to get away sometimes and see me; but as you describe Mrs. Jones I sha'n't have any difficulty in getting on with her. I shall come as soon as I can settle mamma, but don't expect me for at least a week. She is very tiresome about my going,—I dare say it does seem odd to her, but I'm fifty-two, and might be allowed to know what is best for myself by this time, I should think."

The letter ended as abruptly as usual, but there was a postscript which threw light upon poor Anna's intended flight from London, and yet caused Louise to smile.

"Mr. Pollard is going to be married, but I dare say you saw this in the papers, since it was announced yesterday, or of course I should have said nothing about it, as I never take any notice of gossip.

The days which followed the arrival of this letter left Louise little time, however, to reflect upon her sister-in-law's affairs, for all her energies were absorbed in the battle Sir Harry was waging, less for his life, as now became apparent, than for his health.

The long June days dawned—flooding the valley and garden with hot and brilliant sunshine, and waned—bringing the cool fragrant breath of delicious summer evenings through the open window, and she found herself still a prisoner in the tower rooms.

Sir Harry's illness was no longer an astonishing event, but a calmly accepted fact, in his household; his nurse—with her plain gowns, white aprons, spotless Quaker bands at throat and wrists, and grave beautiful face—was a familiar figure. The doctor came and went, and slept at the Castle, or at his home, according to his patient's condition, without explanation or apology; and young Harry returned to duty, or paid flying visits to Morlais, without further notice than a message to the stables.

Still, Sir Harry held grimly on, and fought his malady; aided no doubt by his indomitable will as by his iron constitution.

There were no more sudden changes, but it became evident at length that his condition was improving, however slowly, and the doctor presently told him that he believed his restoration to health would be, in the end, complete.

"I have won—or you have won for me—a few more years before the natural end of old age," said Sir Harry, smiling rather mournfully.

"Well, they're worth having, or you can make

them so, if you choose," said the doctor, stoutly. "Mind, our care must not be relaxed yet in the slightest degree; and you had better make up your mind to winter abroad."

"I can't do without my nurse yet, I suppose," said Sir Harry, with a curious grim smile beneath his grizzled moustache.

"Most certainly not," said the doctor hastily. "Good heavens, don't make me regret I ever raised your hopes at all. You almost owe your life to her."

"Do you think I don't know that?" said Sir Harry Gwyn.

CHAPTER VII

"**HERE** you are at last," said Anna, "I thought you were never coming."

"I hope you haven't thought me rude, but I could not get away," said Louise, greeting her warmly.

"Rude! As if one thought about being polite to one's nearest relations!" said Anna, astonished. "Besides, I consider I'm practically here on my own account. It was quite understood you could n't be at home when I came. How long can you stay?"

"I have the rest of the afternoon to be out for I was able to sleep most of the night," said Louise. "Oh, what a long time since I have been here, and how beautiful it is. Do you like it, Anna?"

"Yes, I like it well enough," Anna admitted. "Of course it seems rather odd to be all alone; and dull is n't the word! I could n't *live* here. But Mrs. Morgan has been kind in her way, and one or two people have called. Aren't you coming indoors?"

"I want all the fresh air I can get," said Louise, and she led the way to her favourite bench in the shade of an old fig tree growing in the sheltered angle of the wall, and now covered with little swelling green figs.

Anna sat down by her side.

The silence of heat reigned: and not a breath of

wind stirred the leaves above them. Through the stillness came the intermittent sound of water dropping from a spout into a moss-grown, roughly-hewn stone trough, overhung by trailing plants of wild strawberry, and shaded by the delicate oak-leaf fern.

White butterflies floated past on the drowsy air, and rose geraniums glowed in the hot sunshine, but the white lilac and the red roses drooped.

A great bush of everlasting sweet peas grew next the old porch, and above it a large-leaved summer clematis, heavily budded, opened great violet eyes.

Over the grey walls straggled the glory roses, and the honeysuckle fell in masses from the coping-stones into the green lane without the garden.

Clumps of spirea filled sheltered corners, and the white foxglove was not grudging standing room among the more cultivated flowers. Purple and yellow pansies glowed in the long rays of the afternoon sunshine, which turned the moss-grown turf into a carpet of gold wherever its dazzling glory fell.

"Well, how is your old man getting on?" said Anna. "I should think you must be pretty sick of him by this time. I should be, in your place."

Louise could not help wondering whether the manner of her sister-in-law had in reality become rougher and more aggressive, or whether she merely felt it more keenly now than in former days.

The peace and beauty of the little garden—of the perfect June day—seemed somehow lessened by Anna's presence.

Her harsh tones and unlovely profile, her flat-chested figure in its ill-fitting grey gown—did not harmonise with the surroundings.

Miss Owen's personality appeared exactly suited to the setting of a London lodging, but here she was out of place.

Louise reproved herself for selfishness and wished Anna away, at one and the same time.

"Sir Harry is better, he is sitting up this afternoon," she said briefly, with a sensation of offence that Anna should thus slightly allude to one whom she had never before heard mentioned save in tones of respect or affection.

"I suppose you'll be coming back then; he can't want you much longer," said Anna, with a little more interest.

"On the contrary, he will want very careful nursing for some time to come," said Louise, annoyed to find herself colouring under her sister-in-law's sharp scrutiny.

"Oh!" in a peculiar tone. "What age did you say he was, by the bye?"

"I did n't say, but he is over sixty, I believe."

"Oh," said Miss Owen.

Louise changed the subject.

"I am sorry to have to leave you alone so long, Anna."

"It is all the same to me," said her visitor, with unflattering composure. "Mrs. Morgan asked me to take my knitting up and sit with her in the evening. You can guess how dull she must have been before she would ask me to do a thing like that."

"And you went?"

"Yes, I *went*," said Anna. "I can't say we hit it off particularly well, but I *went*. At the same time I showed her very plainly I had no intention

whatever of being patronised. However I suppose it was better for both of us than sitting mumping alone."

Louise thought she would have preferred under the circumstances to sit mumping alone, but as usual, she said nothing.

"The way Mrs. Morgan's thoughts run on worldliness is surprising to me," said Anna, pursuing her thoughts aloud. "She thinks of nothing but her dress and appearance, though she isn't a day younger than I am, and a grandmother into the bargain."

"I am going across to see her, of course, before I return," said Louise. "I suppose you won't care to come?"

"Certainly I shall care to come, unless you don't want me; and if you don't, I'd rather you said so, straight out," said Anna gloomily, "though I know it's not much in your line to say things straight out. But I prefer truth to politeness myself."

"You talk as though rude things were necessarily true," said Louise, stung at last into a retort, "or as though tactless people were more sincere than polite ones—it does not follow in the least."

Anna was surprised into silence, and Louise, repentant, once more changed the subject of conversation.

"I did not like to write to Mr. Pollard, even if I had had time, until you told me something more. Who is he going to marry?"

"He is going to marry a widow, a stockbroker's widow, with money—of course—" said Anna, in a hard tone. "She is twenty years younger than he. I have seen her. She is rather pretty, and refined

looking, and they say she will interest herself in parish matters."

She jerked out these sentences with a fierce determination to do justice to her unconscious rival that touched Louise.

"It does not sound a particularly suitable marriage," she said, instinctively seeking for comments likely to soothe the wounded feelings poor Anna fancied she had successfully disguised. "Mr. Pollard is such an old bachelor, one can't imagine him engaged to a pretty young widow; and I should think he will miss his old ways and his old friends. Very likely it will come to nothing."

"I should think it very unlikely," said Anna, but a slight hopefulness dawned in her sombre grey eyes, and the aggressiveness of her manner relaxed.

"It is only fair to tell you that we've missed you, Louise," she said suddenly, "and though I used to find your constant excuses for everybody tiresome, if not affected, yet since you went away, mamma and I have certainly quarrelled far more. I dare say you were of some use pouring oil on the troubled waters. Let every dog have his due."

Louise was too much surprised, and too grateful for this unusual appreciation, to resent the comparison.

"It is very kind of you, Anna, to say that. I did not know I was of any use."

"Well you were. And that's why I came away, at least that's one reason," said Anna gruffly. "Everything seemed to be going wrong, and mother more unbearable every day, so I resolved just to pack up my sticks and be off, in hopes she will be more civil when I go back. I sha'n't hurry,

that is if you don't mind letting me stop—of course I know it's your house."

"Stop as long as you choose," said Louise.

"I'll take care it's no expense, of course."

"I was n't thinking of that."

"Somebody must think of it. Are they—paying you—for your work—up there?" said Anna reddening.

Louise hesitated.

"Oh pray don't tell me if you'd rather not. I don't wish to pry into your secrets," cried her sister-in-law, in a huff.

"But there is no reason why I should not tell you. I was to be paid two guineas a week, the usual fee; but when I did double work, the doctor told me privately that he thought it would ease Sir Harry's mind if I would accept double fees."

"How very unpleasant," said Anna.

"I did not feel it so," said poor Louise, wistfully. "If it eased his mind! I knew it pleased him, for he was in such good spirits, poor fellow, when the doctor told him, and I thanked him. I thought, Anna, what a pleasure it would be to——"

Anna looked so alarmed that she smiled faintly.

"Don't be afraid, I'm not going to offer to share it with you. I mean it would be a pleasure to have something to buy pretty things with. Naturally I should be only too glad to nurse him for nothing if he were poor, but he has plenty of money, and of course it would make him feel very uncomfortable to be under an obligation to me."

"It would make me feel much more uncomfortable to be under an obligation to him," said Anna.

"However, I suppose if a person chooses to work,

she is entitled to be paid. I don't know what mother would say if she knew. We have always held our heads high. But I dare say some people would call it false pride."

"I think it is," said Louise, with unwonted courage.

Anna looked at her in surprise, and rose abruptly.

"Can't we go indoors now? These midges are very tiresome. I suppose the river brings them. I must say I think sitting out of doors a very over-rated pleasure."

Louise felt that the pleasure was certainly a very doubtful one under the present circumstances, and she made no further objection, but meekly followed her independent visitor into her own house.

Surely Anna would have something to say of the prettiness and convenience of her residence.

"I suppose this cottage looks pokier than ever, after living in that great castle over the way. I expect you won't like coming back," said Anna, seating herself in a rush-bottomed elbow chair, and glancing contemptuously round the distempered green walls of the little sitting-room, hung with water-colour drawings from the doctor's large collection, and furnished with a simplicity akin to bareness.

"I don't know. I like extremes," said Louise, dreamily. "But I don't know which extreme I like best. The snugness of a cottage, with only a few steps from a bright little parlour and red-tiled kitchen to one's little white bedroom under the eaves—or the space and the dignity and luxury of a wonderful old place like the Castle. I only know I prefer either to an ordinary house."

"It is lucky you can have one of the two then," said Anna, drily. "Personally I prefer something between a palace and a labourer's cottage, as being better suited to my station in life. But I don't pretend to be romantic and you do. That's the difference between us."

"Why do you say I *pretend*," said Louise.

Anna looked at her.

"You seem to have grown captious. 'Are n't you well?' she said abruptly.

Louise coloured again.

The conviction rushed upon her that a short time ago it would not have occurred to her to reply thus to any comment Anna chose to make, upon her supposed foibles or characteristics. But she had become used to gentler words and ways. Was it possible that already she was so changed by the consideration and even admiration that had been accorded her during the past weeks, that she could no longer tolerate Anna's criticisms?

"I am quite well,—but perhaps I have been a little—spoilt lately," she said, wistfully. "I wonder, Anna? They are all very kind to me—over there. More than kind." She hesitated, and then rose. "There are a few things I want to take back with me. Will you ask Mrs. Jones to bring tea. In here or wherever you prefer it."

Then she left Anna, and went quickly up to her white attic under the roof.

It seemed to her that she must be alone with her thoughts a little while, and brace herself to encounter her sister-in-law's ways with her wonted calm indifference.

"I had forgotten what Anna was like, and I

was n't prepared," she thought. "Of course she is just what she has always been. It is I—I who am changed."

She shut the door, and felt immediately the old charm of solitude stealing about her, and soothing her ruffled spirit. The little room, with its sloping ceiling, stained green furniture and narrow bed,—held but few of her personal possessions, for Louise owned but a scanty measure of this world's goods. A photograph or two in cheap frames, a coloured vase she had prized in her childhood, an inlaid workbox, and worn leather desk, and a gaudy gilt-clasped album dating from the same period. But even these few familiar objects gave the attic an aspect of home.

Mechanically following a life-long habit, she went immediately to the window, pushed aside the white frilled curtain and dark blind which she owed to Mrs. Morgan's care for her comfort,—and looked out.

It was a Saturday afternoon; and that peculiar still hush lay over the valley which was the result of the fact that neither was the saw-mill going, nor were the children crying to each other in the playground of the school upon the river bank, nor was there any of the cheerful bustle of week-day work. For this reason also the little lawn and the flower-beds were left in peace, for the gardeners were absent, with most of the younger inhabitants of the village, at a cricket-match which was being played in the adjacent parish.

The heavy purple mist of a threatened thunder-storm hung over the opposite hills, and the turrets of Morlais gleamed white, as the windows of

the tower shone red in the low rays of the sun, which was already sinking below the hill whereon the cottage stood, and lighting only the further side of the valley.

Louise was startled by the leap of her own heart as her eyes lit upon those turrets and those shining windows.

She had been living in the present, from day to day; absorbed in her work, in sympathy with her patient, in the companionship of her friend the doctor, touched also by the girlish devotion and admiration of little Gwenllian, and the shy attentions of young Harry.

Suddenly she realised the blank that must ensue when she left that atmosphere of warmth and interest and kindness, and returned to her solitary cottage; or worse still, to her cottage no longer solitary, but shared by Anna.

Why had her heart leapt so strangely?

She leant against the side of the window and tried to calm the emotion that possessed her.

They had grown too dear to her—those inmates of the little world of Morlais, whose lives she had been allowed to share for a fleeting space of time. They had grown too dear. She felt as though she were one of themselves.

Louise made no invidious comparisons; even in her thoughts; she did not admit, scarcely perceived—that one was dearer or more interesting than another.

She thought of her life at the Castle as a whole; of the long pleasant summer days, and hours of quiet waiting passed by the open window of the tower room, for she possessed that crowning per-

fection of a good nurse, she did not read on duty. Louise could sit still and do nothing with patience and calm; sufficiently amused by her own thoughts; dreaming a little, taking pleasure in the deep colour of the roses Gwenllian daily brought her, or in the changing shadows of the mountain scenery; but watchful always as a sentinel at his post.

She thought tenderly now of those long watches by day and by night; and of her patient, the ruler of the little kingdom she had so recently quitted.

She remembered kind words that he had spoken, and that she had treasured; for praise was new to her, and especially delightful from his lips, which could also, as she knew very well, utter words impatient and satirical upon occasion. He was quick and sensitive; stupidity or carelessness angered him, but he was also, she thought, extraordinarily appreciative. An approving look from his keen blue eyes could make her heart beat in the recollection alone; the gentle amused toleration of the doctor was unknown to Sir Harry. His own opinions were forcible ones, and his outspokenness had more than once endangered his career; but his sincerity was tempered by a painfully acquired self-control, and softened by an undoubtedly attractive personality.

She realised suddenly that this close association with a nobler and stronger nature than any she had ever known was becoming daily more precious to her; so that she could scarcely bear to imagine what her days would be like, when no longer filled with the care for Sir Harry which had been during the past weeks at once her duty and her delight.

She found herself trembling as she realised the

force of her own feelings, and the depth of regret that must follow, when in the natural course she laid down her work at the Castle and returned to live her own life.

Freedom had appeared attractive for too short a space of time. The key that was to unlock the world had become already valueless.

She blamed her nature, at once too soft and too dependent to stand alone; she blamed her own susceptibility to kindness; her readiness to attach herself to surroundings which awoke her sensuous delight in their beauty and restfulness; the vehemence of her response to every look and word of appeal for those with whom she felt herself in sympathy.

She hid her face in her hands, as though her secret thoughts had been laid bare to the world, not knowing how fair a cloak her habitual gentle reserve lent to the glow of feeling which her dark eyes and varying colour revealed.

"I must grow colder. I must care less. I shall get hardened as I go on," said Louise piteously to herself. "I may not be so happy in the next house I go to—they may not be such delightful people. Oh, poor nurses—if this is their life. To enter the very core of a beautiful home, and be one with its inmates; to be their good angel in time of trouble and sorrow and pain, to share their interest and their suspense, the tears and despair of mourning, the relief and laughter of recovery, and then—a cheque, and your little trunk packed, and out again into the cold. No wonder if some of them, in time, grow weary and indifferent. My heart sinks when I think of beginning again—beginning all over

again with strangers." She shed a few forlorn tears, and then reproached herself.

"This is the old weary serious Louise; not the light-hearted Louise I have been ever since I came to this happy valley. I will be happy. I *will*. I want to so much that I must."

Her heart whispered that after all she was not yet set free from her loved servitude; not yet, nor for many days; and at the thought her face brightened, and she rose from the low window-seat, filled with fresh courage.

She finished bathing her eyes just as Anna called impatiently up the stairs that tea was ready.

Louise went down in a new mood of gaiety which astonished her sister-in-law, and indeed almost annoyed her; for Anna was conservative, and disliked changes of all kinds.

Louise had always been silent and dreamy and preoccupied in manner, and why should she not continue to be so? Anna could not for the life of her see why. She said to herself that it was very odd.

But when they walked over to the doctor's house, Mrs. Morgan was delighted to perceive that her friend was in such good spirits. She was at the same time disappointed that Miss Owen had chosen to accompany Louise, but with her usual philosophy, accepted the situation and made the best of it.

"I was afraid from what Lady Cadoc said that you would be quite worn out," she said, rolling forward the largest armchair with affectionate solicitude.

Lady Cadoc's anxiety for the companionship of Mrs. Owen, the ravings of Gwenllian, and the ac-

counts the doctor had given of Sir Harry's admiration for his nurse,—had almost doubled Mrs. Morgan's friendship for Louise; and as she knew not how to combine devotion to one guest with attention to another, Anna was constrained to sit silent and neglected while her hostess enquired separately and affectionately after every member of the family at the Castle in turn.

Louise was obliged to endure this catechism, and at the close was rewarded by a compliment.

"The doctor says Sir Harry almost owes his life to your nursing."

"Oh, that is nonsense," Louise said, smiling, but her cheeks glowed. "Dr. Morgan would rather give the credit to any one but himself. I am afraid you must have been very lonely without him, often."

"I have so much to do I never have time to think of myself," said Mrs. Morgan, shaking her head. "I got through a good deal of reading."

Anna thought it was time that her voice should be heard.

"I don't call reading the papers—not even weeklies—*reading*," she remarked, with an undue familiarity of tone designed to convey the impression that she was quite at her ease.

Poor Mrs. Morgan always became flurried when Miss Owen dropped statements of this kind, like bombshells, into the conversation. But the secret conviction of her own social superiority to her visitor sustained her, and she asserted herself to the best of her ability.

"I by no means confine myself to the papers, though of course it interests me to see what my friends are doing," she said with dignity, "especi-

ally just now, the very height of the season. I like to see who was at Ascot, for instance. A great many people I know were in the Royal Enclosure this year. I like to read what they wore and all about them."

Miss Owen was not interested in the Royal Enclosure, which she regarded vaguely as a kind of pound for the lost souls of the smart set; but she was always interested in pursuing her own arguments.

"What I call reading," she said sternly, "is sitting down day by day, for a limited time of course (no honest person could pretend to enjoy it for long), to some standard work by a man of genius."

"Well, that is what I have been doing, but I thoroughly enjoyed it. I have been reading the *Cloister and the Hearth*, by Charles Reade; though I am not sure whether Charles Reade has been dead long enough yet to be thought a genius," said Mrs. Morgan, innocently.

"I don't call *fiction*—reading, either," said Anna, "when I say a standard work, I mean a serious book."

"It was Lady Cadoc who recommended me to read it," said Mrs. Morgan with dignity. "She says she buys all the sixpenny classics, and is often surprised to find how good they are."

CHAPTER VIII

LOUISE, returning to Morlais, elected to walk through the valley in the cool of the June evening.

She walked fast, yet not so fast but that she could perceive and enjoy a thousand beauties now visible in the clear pale light that follows sunset, which had been lost to her observation in the blinding sunshine of the afternoon, as she had driven past in the doctor's phaeton.

Ferns of many varieties dipped their fronds into a stream that bubbled over a rocky channel beside the footpath, on its way to the river. The feathery spires of the meadow-sweet scented the hedges. Tall acacias shading the road, dangled white bunches of flower over her head.

Among all the rippling seas of grass surrounding her, only one field had yielded its burden, and there the new mown hay lay in long even curves as it had fallen beneath the grasscutter.

The threatened thunderstorm had rolled away and dispersed itself among the hills, and the atmosphere was calm and peaceful, only disturbed by the perpetual rush of the river over the weir.

The cultivated fields were left behind as soon as the bridge was reached, and her way led past old slate quarries, and bleak frowning crags, until she entered the deer park.

Here stood groups of weeping birch upon the hill-

side, their pale tresses stirred by every wandering breath of the summer evening, bearing their silver armour only in patches above gnarled and deeply serrated growth upon growth of bark. Among them aged trees, heavily encrusted, decayed and twisted, yet lovely still.

The wild road wound upwards, affording fine views of the fertile valley, of the brown river, willow-bound; and of the chain of bare rounded hills in the far distance.

Then she turned into the solemn dark avenue of yews, heavily walled on either side, and shut in with great gates of wrought iron.

The climb was a long one, and Louise was conscious of some bodily fatigue when she stepped beneath the Norman archway; but her spirit was rested, and her heart light with the joy of finding herself once more in the place where she desired of all others to be.

In the banqueting hall she found Gwenllian, book in hand, lingering over a very late tea in company with the *Thoughts of Marcus Aurelius*, and imbibing a little philosophy and a good deal of cake.

She explained that she had only just finished a long game of croquet with Harry.

“But were you not to sit with your uncle?”

“I did for an hour, and then he could n't bear it any longer. You know his way, or you should by this time,” she stole a mischievous glance at Mrs. Owen's changing colour, “imagining himself the soul of courtesy and patience, when all the while he is glowering at one like a suppressed volcano. He really has n't much use for me. Mamma had tea with him as usual, and then he said he'd

get a nap till you came home. So she took the hint and came away."

"I'll go up at once," said Louise, "and take off my things—and go to him."

Gwenllian looked after her a little wistfully as she went away. She was filled with a girlish devotion which as she knew, rather embarrassed than delighted its object. Between nineteen and thirty-three there is a great gulf fixed, which even Gwenllian's affection could not altogether bridge. She felt that she was somehow kept at a distance from her idol, but she was none the less a faithful worshipper.

Sir Harry was seated by the open window, propped up by pillows in a great armchair.

He, too, was reading, but he dropped his book at the opening of the door.

"Here you are at last," he said, in a tone of mingled relief and eagerness.

She had hardly yet become accustomed to him in his new aspect, now that he was up, and shaved, and dressed; his moustache twisted, and his thick grey hair brushed and clipped with military smartness; he looked almost a different being from that helpless grizzled shaggy invalid who had lain so long among his pillows.

"Have you not been sitting up too long?"

"No, I told Griffiths to come at half past seven and help me to bed. It's not half past seven."

"Not quite."

"Then there is time to talk a little. Stop fussing among those medicine bottles, and come and sit by me," said Sir Harry imperiously.

Louise obeyed.

"Have you enjoyed your afternoon?"

She hesitated.

"I enjoyed my walk here this evening."

"I am glad you enjoyed coming back. I can tell you I did not enjoy *my* afternoon."

His voice changed from gruffness to wistfulness.

"I am a very selfish old fellow, nurse," he said, "I don't want you to leave me for so long a time again."

"Very well, I won't," said Louise, gently, "until you feel stronger."

He was silent for a moment.

"I should like to take your arm and crawl up and down the room again, if you're not too tired after your walk."

"I am not too tired. But I am afraid of your over-doing yourself, after such a long day."

"Bosh," said Sir Harry, impatiently.

He was becoming rather a rebellious patient, but she felt it a sign of returning health, and was content.

As he rose unsteadily from his chair and took the soft arm she offered, her face broke into a little smile.

"What are you laughing at?" he asked with his usual quickness.

"I am not laughing, but I smile when I realise how much bigger and taller you are than I thought," she said half shyly and half amused, "you make me feel quite small, towering over me."

"I have lost all my weight."

"You will soon get it back," she said cheerfully.

"I wonder. I feel as though my active days were

gone for ever. I didn't realise how infernally weak I was till I tried to stand."

After one or two turns about the room, he was obliged to desist, and lay back in his armchair exhausted, closing his eyes.

Louise sat beside him in silence.

"Nurse, do you never talk?" he said, without opening his eyes.

"I have talked to you sometimes."

"No, you have answered when I talk to you, and you are a delightful listener; but of yourself you never speak."

"There is so little to say of myself—nothing that would interest you," she said, in rather embarrassed tones.

"Everything about a friend interests me—if I may call you a friend?"

Louise hesitated. He was so sensitive that she feared to chill him by any want of response; yet feared still more to say too much.

"It is good of you to look upon me as a friend," she murmured.

"The friend who came down into the valley of the shadow with me, and led me back into the light of day," he said, in a voice gruff with feeling. "I've talked pretty openly to you—weakness and pain and—and sympathy unseal the fountain of confidence, I suppose." He paused and added deliberately, "I believe I've talked to you of myself more frankly than to any other human being I've ever known."

He waited for a reply, but none came.

"I can't recall that you've ever returned the compliment," he said, grimly, "not that I've any

right to ask for your confidence, of course,—and yet ——”

“Yes, you have, if you’ve given me yours,” said Louise, simply, “and I have n’t any secrets in the world. You may ask anything you choose.”

“I want to realise something about you,” he said, and again she noticed that his voice was as a boy’s voice, eager and interested, holding none of the deliberate and cautious accents of age. “I know what you are to *me*—an angel of mercy and tenderness—but of your life outside this tower, I know nothing—except the few facts the doctor has mentioned concerning you. I want to hear from *you*, of your home before you married—of your friends and family—anything you care to tell me.”

“It would not take long to tell you everything about me.”

“Of course not, since you have not lived so very many years yet.”

“Nearly thirty-four. My father’s name was Lanroe.”

“Any relation of the Dean of that name?” he interrupted.

“His youngest son. I never knew my father, but I have heard nothing in his favour. He was the black sheep, I believe. I think he was brought up extravagantly, and afterwards there was no money to be extravagant upon, and he did n’t know how to make any for himself.”

“That is the usual history of black sheep,” said Sir Harry, drily.

“That is all I know about him, except that he married a half-Spanish half-French girl of sixteen, whom he found singing in a café in Paris. That

was my mother; and I know nothing about her except that she died when I was about seven years old. He died some time earlier; and I was sent home to my aunt in London."

She paused and then said in a low tone.

"My life in Paris—is like a dream. All the persons in it are shadowy. I have no clear memories of childhood as some people—as *you* have. I remember only trifling things. Disconnected pictures. Perhaps the shock of the great change—from being petted and happy—helped to kill my memory. I have often thought so. I vaguely remember arriving in London, and being frightened and wretched, and always crying myself to sleep. I know I was glad to go to school. I went to a cheap boarding-school at Brighton. I stayed there till I was eighteen, and after the first I did not come home often for the holidays, because of the expense. When I came back at eighteen I had decided, as so many girls do—to become a hospital nurse. But I found my cousin Frederick at home, and—and I married him."

She paused again; a sudden impulse rushed over her and she said:

"I don't know to this day why I married him. I suppose it was because I pitied him so intensely. He suffered very much, and though my aunt idolised him, she had a very unfortunate manner, which irritated him, the more because she was always reproaching him for—for his failure in life. She was to be pitied too, I know now, for he had cost her a great deal of anxiety. He had been—wild. But then I thought her unkind and unsympathetic to him—as to me; and I was flattered because he

preferred my tendance to hers or his sister's. Anyway I married him. It was supposed he would recover, but he never recovered; and from that moment the story of my life is the story of his sick-room—until he died—last October."

"Only last October?"

"Eight months ago."

There was a tap at the door, and Griffiths entered.

"Are you ready, Sir Harry?"

"Yes, I am ready. I will go back to bed. Stay, bring the reading lamp first."

"Very good, Sir Harry, I'll go and get it at once."

"The windows are so narrow, I can't see to read unless I am close to them," he said; but as Griffiths departed to fetch the light, his voice changed.

"Thank you for telling me. I understand it all now," he said. "You have put it all before me in a word," and she felt her hand taken, and the back of it lightly brushed by his grizzled moustache.

CHAPTER IX

YOUNG Harry Gwyn at this time, and doubtless on account of his uncle's illness, obtained leave to visit Morlais very often, and played a great many games of croquet with his cousin Gwenllian.

Lady Cadoc wished he would come to the point and propose to her child, for he was well off, in addition to his prospects of succeeding his uncle; and Gwenllian was poor.

Also, if Lady Cadoc possessed any sentiment, it was for her old home; and she wished sincerely to see her daughter reigning there.

Gwenllian was, moreover, a difficult subject. Modern to her finger-tips, with opinions of her own upon almost every subject under the sun, she was also positive and assured of her own judgment as youth and ignorance could make her; and Lady Cadoc had long ago despaired of establishing any influence over the mind of her child. In matrimony, she felt, lay Gwenllian's salvation, and her relief was great, when she perceived that her daughter was favourably inclined towards her cousin. In the early spring Lady Cadoc had been sure that Harry's intentions were serious; so sure that she let her house in town instead of taking Gwenllian out for the season. The poor lady was not sorry to economise thus, with the prospect of a wedding and trousseau expenses before her. It was be-

sides, as she said, in the highest degree ridiculous to tire herself to death and live beyond her income, in order to take out a girl who openly proclaimed that society bored her, and that she should quit the world of fashion and enter the world of art, as soon as she reached the age of twenty-one years; whether her mother consented or not.

"So I give you fair warning, Mamma," Gwenllian had said, making this concession to dutifulness quite good-humouredly, as though nothing more could be expected of her than that she should give notice of her intentions in good time.

"What girls are coming to nowadays I don't know," said poor Lady Cadoc to her daughter Isabel, who was so well and satisfactorily married.

"Nonsense Mamma, I was just the same. I meant to be a nurse just as Gwenllian intends to be an artist, though I didn't say so as openly; but I always told you that Gwenllian was spoilt. She was the youngest and you would spoil her, so of course she is as selfish as she can be. I sha'n't bring up my little Phyllis as you brought us up at all: she shall be an old-fashioned child and do what she's told. But as to Gwenllian, it will all come right; she will fall in love just as I did. It is not as if she were plain or stupid. She is pretty and bright and clever."

"Oh, clever, all the girls one hears of are clever nowadays," said Lady Cadoc, pettishly; but she was inconsistently annoyed with her brother, who laughed the notion of Gwenllian's cleverness to scorn.

"She is not even clever enough to reverence her betters," he said, "for that is an acquired quality,

born of understanding and appreciation; when it has not been inculcated in childhood, as it should."

"I am sure she talks as cleverly as any of those up-to-date books—though I don't pretend not to be shocked at her ideas," said Lady Cadoc.

"My dear, you confound words with ideas," said Sir Harry, impatiently. "Gwenllian has never had an idea in her life that I am aware of. Poor little thing. She echoes the last phrase that has tickled her fancy; and is just old enough to grasp the surface meaning of an aphorism, while the psychological truth it contains means nothing to her—*can* mean nothing to one who has no experience of life."

"How can you expect her to have experience of life, at nineteen," said her mother resentfully.

Sir Harry laughed.

"I am very far from expecting it, or wishing it." Then with one of his sudden changes of manner, he added in softened tones, "God closes the ears of the young to the voice of the old, lest they should listen, and understand wisdom, and be no longer young."

Lady Cadoc had said nothing to her brother concerning her hopes of a marriage between her nephew and her daughter, but since she felt it a necessity to confide in someone, she opened the subject with Dr. Morgan.

"I am sure I can trust you, and in my poor brother's weak state I can't go to him; and it is very difficult to know what to do. About dear Gwenllian. In the spring I had no doubt—young

Harry was like her shadow. Everyone in town looked upon it as a settled thing, but now—I can't feel so sure. I don't know what it is. One has an instinct in these matters. Yet he takes every possible opportunity to come over here. But if he doesn't speak soon I really think I ought to take her away. I can't have my child's heart broken, and I am almost sure she cares for him."

The doctor shook his head. "How can I advise you? To begin with, I never advise the marriage of first cousins."

"I have no feelings of that kind," said Lady Cadoc, mildly but obstinately, for this was an objection she had braced herself to meet with firmness. "One sees such marriages every day and no harm come of them. Everyone has their ideas. Some think one way and some another. It is exactly like the Deceased Wife's Sister."

The doctor did not see the resemblance, but he knew Lady Cadoc too well to attempt rational argument with her. It was besides, his business to soothe and not to contradict, so he replied:

"Why not allow matters to take their course? Your daughter is very young, but she has a decided character of her own, and gives one the impression of being able to manage her own affairs. And young Harry is a fine fellow. If the affair is serious they will come to an agreement in time. I should think it a mistake to interfere. It is not as if his attentions were so pronounced as to be compromising. They appear to me to be more like brother and sister together."

"You would not have said so in London," said Lady Cadoc.

"Well, well. Then take her away. When she has gone he will know his own mind."

But this was exactly the advice she did not wish to receive.

"It would be very inconvenient to do that, when you know I have let my house. Surely it would be better to speak to young Harry and tell him it is time something was settled. If I only had the nerve. But it is not easy for a woman."

There was a significant pause, but the doctor turned a deaf ear to the implied suggestion.

"If only her father were alive," sighed Lady Cadoc.

Dr. Morgan could hardly help smiling. He had been acquainted with the late Lord Cadoc, and found it difficult to imagine him calling young Harry to account.

Lady Cadoc was obliged to be explicit.

"If *you* could sound young Harry," she said, as though suddenly struck by a bright idea.

But the doctor declined to meddle in so delicate a matter.

"He would certainly resent my interference, and he would be quite right," he said warmly. "To be frank, I think your nephew has a good deal of Sir Harry's spirit. If you really believe your daughter's happiness is at stake, I should think any attempt to coerce him would be most unwise."

"I certainly could n't coerce him. He is more likely to coerce me," said Lady Cadoc, helplessly. "It was his authoritative manner that first made me think he would make such a good husband for Gwennlian. Unless she were a little afraid of her

husband, heaven knows what she would do. I am quite sure she cares for Harry. He has that tiresome way A. D. C.'s always get into, of worrying people to do what they don't want to, and taking the lead, and driving their betters about like flocks of sheep; yet she never resents it. She falls in with his plans quite meekly. It is so unlike Gwenllian; who says no, as a matter of course to every thing *I suggest.*"

"Why not put it off until Sir Harry is about again?"

"His progress is so slow. I don't know when that will be."

"It is bound to be very slow, for his illness has been very severe, and at his age, convalescence is not to be hurried. I do not want him to be worried with problems of any kind until his strength is re-established, but I hope that will be in a few weeks' time, and then you can have the benefit of his advice," said the doctor.

But Lady Cadoc was particularly anxious that the matter should be settled before Sir Harry was about again, for she had more than a misgiving on the subject of his approval, and was aware that he looked upon Harry and Gwenllian as a couple of children, who had been brought up together as brother and sister.

Still, opportunity and courage alike failed her so often that she postponed the explanation she was determined to have with her nephew from day to day; and thus young Harry came and went, and spent long summer afternoons playing croquet with Gwenllian in full view of Sir Harry's window; while Gwenllian on her side dropped no hint of

any desire to leave Morlais, nor to return to her art studio—and June gave place to July.

Sir Harry's recovery was slow, as his illness had been long; and it did not appear to the doctor that he was as impatient to resume his ordinary life as might have been expected.

He submitted to the régime imposed by his physician, with surprisingly good grace; and made no demur when he was forbidden to attempt riding or walking for the present, and sent for long drives in the open barouche, with his nurse by his side.

The doctor explained privately to Louise that he had ordered her to attend her patient thus, not because it was necessary, but because if she did not go, Lady Cadoc most certainly would.

"Until he is stronger," he said, "it is most desirable that his nerves and temper should not be irritated. I quite expected to have had to order him away from home, simply that he might be rid of her; for she has an exasperating effect on him, and small wonder. But you have been so tactful, and get on with him so well, that I really think he is better where he is. He would be very restless and uncomfortable as an invalid in some seaside hotel. I wish you could go with him to the South this winter, but I don't see how that can be managed, unless we came too—and that is not possible. He must go alone, poor fellow—but by that time I hope he will be quite himself again."

"You will tell me when it is time for me to leave, won't you?" said Louise, wistfully. "I have said nothing. I am leaving it all to you. But I can't help thinking it ought to be soon. There is so lit-

tle for me to do now, beyond giving him his medicines at the right time, and going out with him, and talking to him."

"But who else could do those things to please him? He is not easily pleased. Don't think of leaving yet."

"But will you speak to him about it?"

"I will," he promised; then added, "surely you can't be yearning to get back to that sister-in-law of yours? By-the-by, how long is she going to stay?"

"She said, till October."

"How can she leave her mother so long?"

"It appears they have quarrelled."

"Aye, since you left, they have nobody to bully but each other," said the doctor with much satisfaction. "But you do not dislike being here? Of course it was hard work at first——"

"Dislike being in this beautiful place——" said Louise. "Who could? And when they are all so kind to me."

Her head was bent over her sewing, and the doctor did not see the colour mounting in her cheeks.

The day after this conversation, when the doctor paid his usual morning visit, he found Sir Harry alone in the library. He was now able to dispense altogether with attendance at night, and passed his day between his study and the garden, where Louise walked with him daily.

"I have been talking to your nurse—she was asking me about leaving."

Sir Harry turned on him sharply.

"Does she want to go?"

"I can't say that. She has a natural delicacy about staying on now that there is no hard work to be done. I could n't tell her that there was any actual necessity for her to remain; but I do say very emphatically that I hope you won't think of letting her go yet. For your own sake, because I think that until your general tone of health is perfectly restored, her constant attention is very desirable; and for hers, because I think she has had a very long and severe strain upon her powers, and that a little rest and luxury will do her no harm."

Sir Harry rose from his chair and took a couple of turns about the room, and Dr. Morgan watched him with a half-sad, half-affectionate, pride.

This man who was ten years older than himself, and whom his hands had helped to rescue from the jaws of death, now stood before him almost restored to his former vigour, while he, the restorer, was journeying rapidly to the grave.

Sir Harry's eagle face was regaining its wonted ruddiness of tint; his grey hair, closely cropped, yet showing trace of obstinate wiry curl, was still thick and plentiful; his keen blue eyes, hardly less bright than in his far-off youth, looked forth eagerly at life from beneath their grizzled curtains of overhanging brows.

His broad shoulders had lost the stoop of weakness; and his gaunt frame, though wasted by illness, was yet that of a powerful and muscular man; almost a giant, he appeared, beside the doctor's bent back, and narrow hollow-chested figure.

"Strange as it may seem to you," said Dr. Morgan, imagining that Sir Harry was undecided, "I

think she has probably never been so happy in her life as she is here; and I know, feeling as you do, how much you owe to her devotion, that you will be glad to do her any kindness in your power ——”

“Good God, Morgan, what are you talking about,” said Sir Harry, putting a hand almost roughly on the doctor’s shoulder, with a laugh, half embarrassed, half ironical. “Do you mean to say you haven’t seen—you haven’t guessed—I mean to marry her.”

The doctor had time to recover from his amazement, or emotion—before Sir Harry faced him again; for after making this announcement he went to the window, and stood there looking out for a long time in silence. Then he said again:

“You hadn’t thought of it?”

“I give you my word the notion never crossed my mind.”

“Your mind must be a good deal less acute than I gave it credit for,” said Sir Harry, drily.

Then he burst forth passionately:

“What do you think I’m made of? She is a beautiful woman—possessed of all the virtues so far as I can see, with the crowning gift of silence, concerning herself—and them. Am I too old to marry? Do you think me an old fool?”

“You would do the wisest thing you ever did in your life to marry her,” said the doctor.

“Why were you surprised then?” His voice changed. “But you have reason to be surprised. I have given no one any right, during the past ten years, to imagine I should ever marry again.”

“That’s it,” said the doctor simply.

Sir Harry came and sat opposite him once more.

"Morgan, when I thought life was—slipping away—I realised that during those ten years I had held it too lightly. I can't explain. There are thoughts for which we have no words. Perhaps as the eyes of the body wax dimmer, the eyes of the soul grow clearer. I saw everything in a different light. But I have had a new life—however short—given to me. I will make the most of it. At least I will not mope it away in dismal solitude."

The doctor did not speak. He grasped the hand held out to him.

"I have shut myself up here away from everybody—you can't count children and fools—" said Sir Harry with his usual impatient conciseness—"in my rage with Providence, which cut my life in half when my idol—was taken from me. I am not unfaithful. *Her* memory stands alone—sacred and perfect. But I am mortal man yet and she is a spirit—and—and life has n't been worth living during the past ten years as I was living it. This is a different, a more human love; perhaps a closer sympathy, who knows?"

His blue eyes looked away from the doctor.

"I should be a fool to cast it from me."

There was a pause, and Sir Harry appeared to be musing deeply: the doctor murmured some word of congratulation.

"Wait," said Sir Harry, grimly, "I told you my intentions, not her's. We have come to no understanding yet. I was afraid it was too soon. Women are conventional."

"Not Louise," said the doctor, quickly. He was unconscious that he had used Mrs. Owen's Christ-

ian name, but Sir Harry drew his brows together with instant though evanescent displeasure.

"I was n't thinking of her," he said curtly. "I was thinking of my sister. I do not care a fig for her opinion, of course; but she would be annoyed if she knew my intentions, and might take herself off; and then—Mrs. Owen could hardly remain here, under the circumstances—and I want her to remain."

"You have given me your confidence, may I venture to give you my advice?" said the doctor earnestly.

"Of course."

"Marry her at once. Yes, yes, I know it is not settled yet," his smile was melancholy, "but if you have made up your mind—it *will* be settled; for you are one of the men who get what they want. Marry her at once and take her abroad—to Switzerland, now. She will take care of you, and the air will be just what is needed for your health, and it will be easy to go South for the winter. The waiting for the correct twelve months to elapse in her case is sheer absurdity. A woman tied to a living corpse as she was, for years and years. A handful of people—fools—will talk, possibly, though she is so little known that that is not likely. But if they do! what does it matter what they say—let them say ——"

He saw that his words were wasted on Sir Harry, who was merely forcing himself to listen civilly.

"No one shall have anything to say about *her*; even if I come to an understanding with her, I would prefer that nothing should be known until the year of her widowhood was ended," he said,

with an obstinacy that caused the doctor to suspect him of sharing, in some degree, the conventionality of which he accused his sister. He shook his head despondently, and at the gesture Sir Harry laughed, with one of his sudden changes of mood; and thrust his hand through his thick hair, where traces of the ruddy chestnut yet shone through the conquering silver.

"Come, come, Morgan," he said, genially, "I know you've reason on your side, but my plans are made, and I've no fancy for an invalid honeymoon. It will be time enough to talk of wintering abroad when I've shot the coverts over a few times," he added, coolly. "By that time I shall be my own man again, I hope, and not the tottering convalescent I am now. Meantime I don't regret having had this out with you—it's as well you should know privately, at least, what my hopes and wishes are——"

Louise entered the library as he uttered the words, and both men started almost guiltily, though they had been expecting her entry, since it was the hour when she daily accompanied Sir Harry on his morning walk in the garden.

She smiled on them both, serene and unconscious; and asked Sir Harry if he were ready, or if she should come for him a little later.

"No, no, I am ready—waiting," he said hastily. "There is nothing more to say, is there, Morgan?"

Dr. Morgan said there was nothing, and took his leave, and went away, feeling nevertheless that there was much more that he would have liked to say, but not assured of the wisdom of saying it.

Sir Harry took his nurse's arm and leant upon it

lightly as he walked up and down the paths of the kitchen-garden, which lay just beyond the enclosure loved of Louise, and to the south of the Castle.

The moment of plenty was come. The late strawberries hung their scarlet heads upon their straw beds; the big yellow raspberries shone juicy and golden in the sun, and the berries of the red currants glowed like ruby wine in tiny transparent globes. The black currants wore every hue, from green to purple, pending the gloss of ripeness. Bursting gooseberries in hairy coats dangled above rows of crisp lettuce. Behind a great hedge of sweet peas, red, white, and blue, a gardener, unconscious of his master's approach, whistled loudly and cheerfully, as he dug young potatoes from the brown earth, and threw them into his wooden basket.

"I feel stronger to-day. Let us extend our walk," Sir Harry said. "At least, as far as we can go on level ground, which is not very far."

They passed through a gateway in the yew hedge, and took a little path which led through a somewhat neglected shrubbery. Here were thickly flowering Portuguese laurels, and spreading Spanish chestnuts in flower, filling the air with their heavy odour; but presently they came to the moorland of the park beyond.

The walking here was pleasanter than on the gravel paths, for the heather and moss were dry, and the rocks afforded many resting places.

Sir Harry looked round at the wide sky, and at the open space of air and sunshine, and drew a deep breath of delight and satisfaction.

"What a long long time I've been in prison," he

said, "and you, too. Never mind, we will make up for it now."

His keen eyes noted a tiny clump of white heather in bloom beneath the shelter of a great boulder, and he stooped and plucked it, and gave it to Louise.

"It is a good omen," she said, smiling rather nervously.

"Of what?"

"Of your speedy recovery."

She coloured beneath his searching glance.

Sir Harry had not meant to confide his wishes to Louise for some time to come; but he had put them into words already this morning, and they had acquired fresh force in consequence. He was impetuous, and his fancy for her, which was yet almost too recent to be called love, had taken a strong hold upon him, at an age when such fancies are not as a rule lightly roused in a man of his character and fastidiousness.

Moreover he was keenly susceptible to the beauties of nature; the exquisite pure warmth of the summer morning, the fresh breath of the summer breeze across the heather, the joy of near perfection of foliage and bloom, and distant grandeur of forest and mountain against a cloudless sky—all united with the invigorating consciousness of returning health, to deepen and quicken his passion for the beautiful woman who stood beside him, colouring like a girl beneath his eyes. Sir Harry was moved, all in a moment, to break his resolution; if he could be said even to remember that it ever existed.

"Then you look forward to my recovery?"

"Why, of course," she answered, visibly nervous,

"though I am sorry also, naturally, that the time must come when you won't want me any longer."

"The time will never come, Louise," he said, with an emotion that communicated itself to her like an electric shock. "I can't do without you. You've made yourself altogether necessary to my happiness. I want you with me now—and always."

CHAPTER X

SIR HARRY kept the secret of his engagement for a week, which under the circumstances was, the doctor thought, sufficiently surprising, for he was not particularly apt at concealing his feelings; and as he now spent the greater part of the day out of doors upon the moor with Louise, and was obviously jealous and ill at ease if she bestowed a word or glance upon anyone but himself, the tongues of the household began to wag; and Dr. Morgan was not surprised when Lady Cadoc requested an interview with him, nor at the momentous words with which she prefaced her remarks.

"I hope you won't think me ungrateful or uncharitable, Dr. Morgan."

He replied, with well-acted surprise, that the faintest suspicion of such a possibility wronged him.

"Then I must tell you, in the very strictest confidence, that I am afraid we have all been mistaken in Mrs. Owen."

"How so?"

"I think," explained Lady Cadoc, "that she is trying to set her cap at my brother."

The doctor did not very well know what to say, so he once more assumed an expression of dignified astonishment, and waited.

"I know she is a friend of yours—or rather that

you and Mrs. Morgan have been very kind to her," said Lady Cadoc, "so I thought it best to speak to you privately about it. Of course I have said nothing to her."

"What do you want me to do?"

"To send her away, of course," said Lady Cadoc, opening her eyes.

He tried to suggest that Sir Harry was old enough to take care of himself.

"No man is ever old enough to take care of himself, especially in a case of this kind," said Lady Cadoc, with conviction, "or rather, the older they are, one might say, the less able they are. And sick nurses have such opportunities. I must say I thought better of Mrs. Owen. The most dreadful part of it all is that she has only been a widow nine months."

The doctor had been so sure that this sentence was coming that he could hardly wait for the end of it.

"My dear lady," he said, impatiently, "you must be aware that I have no influence over Sir Harry."

"But you have influence over Mrs. Owen," retorted Lady Cadoc.

He was nonplussed for the moment.

"That is true, but why should I exercise it against her own interest?"

"It cannot be to her interest to get talked about."

"No," said the doctor.

"Besides, you must surely see how very unequal such a match would be."

"You mean that he is too old—" said the doctor, wilfully misunderstanding.

"Of course he is too old," said Lady Cadoc, "but I am not thinking of that. *She* is not particularly young."

"She is three and thirty," said the doctor sharply.

Lady Cadoc's smile was pitying. On such a question she felt herself so infinitely his mental superior.

"I dare say she has told you she is only thirty-three," she said, "but nothing would ever induce *me* to believe it. That is not the question."

"I thought you liked her?"

"I did. I do. I thought her charming, and she *is* charming," said Lady Cadoc, with emphasis. "So very gentle and amiable, and so capable in many ways. She would make an ideal companion."

"Sir Harry may think the same."

"Nonsense," said Lady Cadoc, severely, "I mean for a lady, of course. A companion and a wife are very different things."

"Not infrequently," said the doctor drily. "You know she has saved his life."

"Of course I know it. That is why I said I hoped you would not think me ungrateful. I want you to feel how fully I acknowledge it. I *do* acknowledge it," said Lady Cadoc, waving her hand. "But that is no reason why he should marry her. Every professional nurse who has brought a gentleman patient through a dangerous illness cannot expect a proposal of marriage in return, though I am sorry to say I believe they too often get it. At least seven different doctors have saved my life over and over again. Would you have me marry them all? or any of them?"

The doctor restrained a smile.

"Surely you must see how unsuitable it would be?"

"I cannot see that," said the doctor, obstinately. "She is a very beautiful and charming person, with the docility of temper which—pardon me—I fancy your brother would require in a wife——"

"I am not talking of what she is," interrupted Lady Cadoc with some asperity, "but of who she was."

"Well, who was she?"

"She was nobody. That's just it. Nobody at all. And it would be doubly absurd that my brother should marry his hospital nurse, when he has quarrelled with his own daughter for marrying his agent."

"Forgive me, but that was not the whole reason of the quarrel," said the doctor stiffly, "though I regret his attitude towards his daughter as much as you do."

"I never said I regretted it," said Lady Cadoc, rather peevishly. "Of course it is all very sad. Family quarrels always are; but it was a shocking marriage and she behaved shockingly."

Then she began to cry.

"I don't like talking like this. Poor dear Margaret, I am sure I have always been sorry for her, but when it came to choosing between my brother and her, what was I to do? My sister Sophia chose to take Margaret's part, so he and she have never spoken since. Harry will not put up with half measures. And I respected him so much for his devotion to his wife's memory—she was one in a thousand—and that he should suddenly be car-

ried away like this at his age by an artful woman. Do pray forgive me for calling her so, but what can I say? And just think what a blow for poor young Harry after being practically brought up to consider himself his uncle's heir. Oh, I can't believe he can be in earnest. There ought to be a law against second marriages. They lead to nothing but quarrels. I'm sure I don't want to quarrel with my brother, but I never could—I never *could* approve of this."

The doctor could not help perceiving that Lady Cadoc had reason for lamentation, the more especially when he considered her hopes for Gwenllian.

He thought it best to pacify her by promising to suggest that the time had come when Sir Harry could easily dispense with his nurse's services; but in the meantime Louise herself had observed, through all the mist of preoccupation with her lover that enshrouded her senses,—the sudden coldness of Lady Cadoc, and the shy consciousness with which her erstwhile faithful follower Gwenllian now avoided her.

She felt the delicacy of her position, and pleaded for Sir Harry's leave to return to her cottage.

Sir Harry, with the blindness of a lover—or an ostrich—assured her that it was impossible that anyone could have noticed the change in his manner towards her, and that his sister was not nearly so intelligent as she supposed.

Louise could have answered that she had never suspected Lady Cadoc of intelligence, but that the simplest woman is usually quicker than a man in detecting a love-affair; but her arguments were rendered unnecessary by Dr. Morgan's re-

port of the promise that had been extracted from him.

"I have no doubt Lady Cadoc will take a different view as soon as she knows all," said Dr. Morgan, who could not well have felt more doubtful on the subject than he did. "But she declares that comment has been excited, and that under the circumstances it would be imprudent for Mrs. Owen to remain."

"If that is so, she shall learn my intentions at once," said Sir Harry, in a fiery tone that augured ill for the pacific nature of the coming interview.

"I think it would be better so," said the doctor.

"It will be a bore if she takes herself off," said Sir Harry, frowning and twisting his moustache, "it was that which I hoped to avoid. Three months' useless separation."

"Mrs. Owen will only be the other side of the river," said the doctor, smiling in spite of himself as he perceived how thorough the absorption of Sir Harry in his love affair had become. "If you would be a little patient and make allowances for your sister's surprise I believe she could soon be won over. You know there is often a strong feeling under these particular circumstances."

"I know," said Sir Harry shortly. Then he spoke again, eagerly, "You think that she might be persuaded to take things pleasantly and remain, and enable Louise to stay on?"

"I think," said the doctor drily, "that a little tact and persuasion would induce her to remain, very easily." To himself he reflected—She has let her town house till the end of July, and she can't go to London in August and September.

Sir Harry lost no time. His tact and persuasion, however, were confined to a sentence of six words, in which he informed his sister that he intended to marry Mrs. Owen.

She was scarcely prepared for the suddenness of the announcement, and had recourse to tears to give herself time to consider how she should receive it.

Sir Harry, who was accustomed to behold his sister overcome with emotion on the slightest provocation, waited till she had removed her handkerchief from her eyes, and then asked her impatiently what she had to say.

Lady Cadoc observed his expression, and realised that remonstrance would make him angry without shaking his resolution. She looked up at him tearfully.

"What can I say, Harry? You can't expect me to like it."

"I expect you to behave as if you liked it," he said with a grim laugh.

"But you can't have thought—oh dear, oh dear—you whom we all thought so devoted—and poor young Harry—and—and—it is n't as if one could suppose her disinterested—" sobbed Lady Cadoc distractedly. Though she was aware of her own indiscretion and wished above all things to avoid quarrelling with or alienating her brother, she yet could not resist these broken utterances of disapproval.

The situation was happily saved, and the thunder cloud gathering on Sir Harry's brow dispersed, by Gwenllian, who had been reading unperceived in the window-seat of the banqueting hall.

She came swiftly forward, and with a demonstrativeness unusual to her, threw her arms round Sir Harry's neck, and clung to him.

"Oh dear, dear Uncle Harry, I am so glad; she is the most beautiful and sweetest angel in the world, and she adores you, and you'll make her happy at last."

"Why, here is somebody who is pleased, anyway," said Sir Harry, and he fairly lifted her from the ground, and returned her kisses heartily. "I'll leave you to talk to your mother, Gwenllian, and to persuade her to stay on here till October, when we shall be married. Of course Louise can't stay here if you don't."

He quitted the hall abruptly, and sought and found young Harry in the garden enclosure, where with characteristic brevity, but in much gentler tones, he made the same announcement to him.

The boy turned white through all his sunburn, and then flushed scarlet from flaxen hair to cleft chin, but he made a gallant effort to smile, and utter his embarrassed congratulations.

"I—I've seen it coming, uncle," he stammered. "Thank you for telling me yourself."

But his painful change of colour had struck a pang through Sir Harry's generous heart. He put a hand on young Harry's shoulder.

"I can't say—this sha'n't make any difference to you, Harry boy," he said simply, "for of course—it may. But I can say this—it shall make as little difference as I can help."

"I—I was n't thinking of anything of that sort," said young Harry, almost as though he were chok-

ing, and he turned away, muttering some inaudible excuse.

Sir Harry was puzzled. He had thought to have met with more response, but he made allowance for the boy's natural disappointment and went slowly back to the house; feeling a little dispirited and weary from emotion and exertion, for after all, he was not yet completely restored to health.

But Louise was watching for him, with the tray of soup and toast that was due at this hour, and he drew her into the library with him, and closed the door.

There were moments that atoned for any impatience or want of consideration, that he had ever shown towards her.

To Louise, capable by nature of appreciating to the utmost every luxury of human emotion, the ups and downs of Sir Harry's character were a thousand times more attractive than the level sympathy and amiability of Dr. Morgan. She felt him to be at once capable of greater faults and higher perfection, at once more earthy and more spiritual.

She was less a woman wanting a lover than a spirit seeking its mate. In her mental vision she beheld Sir Harry's mighty and brilliant personality standing forth in bold relief against the black curtain which shrouded her own innocent unhappy past. They had no memories in common, but she knew that they had all else; and though possessed by a vague sense of her own unworthiness, she was also possessed by that keen consciousness peculiar to a woman in love, of the power within herself to live up to the utmost of her lover's ideal.

Her desire to please, already a strong characteristic, became almost an obsession in his presence.

When he turned to her for sympathy, her response was at once so tender and so passionate that it would have been difficult for even the exactingness of Sir Harry to be disappointed.

If anything about her displeased him, it was perhaps her humility. Louise lacked entirely *l'art de se faire valoir*.

She gave of her confidence, of her devotion, of her affection, full measure, counting no cost; and was too simple to enhance the value of the smallest favour by affecting to deny it.

His sincerity was gratified by this trait in her character; but he had formed his notions of feminine perfection on a different model, and was not always certain whether the contrast charmed or vexed him.

But of his delight in her subtle understanding, her quick response to his every change of mood, her soothing influence upon his too irritable temper, he had no doubt at all. He was too loyal to own, even to himself, that he had never known the restfulness of such perfect companionship before. He dwelt rather upon her beauty, which was of the type that appealed to him most strongly; and upon her sweetness of nature, and gentleness of disposition, which appeared to him the complement of his own fiery temperament.

He threw himself back in his armchair, and leant his head wearily against her shoulder, as she knelt beside him.

"I am tired, Louise. It is strange how seldom I

remember that I am getting old—that I *am* old. I wonder how often *you* think of it?”

“I never think of it,” she answered, sincerely. “Or if I think of it at all, it is to realise that your spirit is younger than mine. Younger in some ways than anybody’s I have ever known. You take so much interest, you enjoy everything so keenly. I thought I loved life out of doors, the life that is so new to me, as much as anyone could, till I went out with you and saw the woods, and the moors, and the river, through your eyes.”

“I have lived with them all my life. These things are not learnt in a moment. The country does not yield its secrets so easily.”

“Until a year ago I had never lived in the country, scarcely seen it,” she murmured. “It has all come upon me at once—the beauty of the earth and the wonder of your love.”

She touched his grey head with her lips. There was love, and reverence, and the passionate protection of motherhood in that silent caress. But Sir Harry drew her face down to his, and sat resting thus in silence for a long while.

“God knows I am grateful to you, dear,” he said at last, in a low voice, “such tenderness as yours comes seldom enough into any man’s life—least of all when that life is nearing its end.”

“Before the news spreads any further—before it reaches the village, I have a good mind to go and call on Mrs. Owen’s sister-in-law,” said Lady Cadoc to Gwennllian.

“Louise has n’t told her yet. They want to tell as few people as possible for the present,” said Gwennllian, doubtfully.

"That is the reason I want to go—before she knows anything about it."

"I don't think she is the sort of woman you would get on with at all, Mamma, you know I met her once at Mrs. Morgan's house."

"What is she like?"

Gwenllian hesitated. "She is the kind of person who thinks it necessary to impress upon you that she does n't think the better of a man because he has a title."

"My dear Gwenllian! she must be quite impossible," said Lady Cadoc, sincerely shocked. "But I shall go all the same."

There were limits to Gwenllian's influence over her mother. She shrugged her shoulders, and made no further effort to dissuade her, consoled by the reflection that no amount of visits from anybody to Miss Owen, would shake her uncle's determination to marry Louise.

His growing absorption, his almost frantic devotion, his fierce championship of his affianced wife, filled little Gwenllian with strange sensations of mingled awe, amusement, and envy.

"If young men of to-day could love like that," she thought, and even at the thought her fair face flamed, "but Uncle Harry reminds one of the knights of old. He belongs to the past. One can imagine his riding twenty miles before breakfast to '*humbly hope she caught no cold*,' after the ball of the night before, and thinking nothing of doing it. One can imagine him killing any man who came between them. How dreadful it would be if she were not worthy, but she *is* worthy. And it is happiness which makes her more beautiful every day."

Some of her thoughts she put into words when she talked the matter over with young Harry out on the croquet lawn; but she found him strangely unwilling to discuss his uncle's engagement.

"Of course he's too old for her. A man of sixty has no business to marry a beautiful woman like Mrs. Owen," he growled.

"Why, she's over thirty. Surely it's a very suitable age?" said Gwenllian.

"A woman of thirty is at her best. As was well said, '*No woman under thirty is worth speaking to,*'" said Harry sternly, but he conveniently ignored the other half of the quotation. "Uncle Harry is a great deal too old for her, but I suppose no one can stop it."

"I should hope no one would try," Gwenllian said, with flashing eyes. "It would break her heart. Can't you see she worships the very ground he treads on?"

Young Harry winced, and then laughed bitterly.

"Or are you like mamma," said Gwenllian, holding her head high, and swelling with indignation, for in her twentieth year it was a little hard to be told that no one under thirty was worth speaking to, "Mamma who laughs at the idea of Louise being in love with Uncle Harry, and declares that she knows only too well which side of her bread is buttered; and is marrying him simply in order to be Lady Gwyn and mistress of this great house and property."

"Does Aunt Belle say that?" Harry said. His blue eyes, that were so like Sir Harry's, sparkled, and his dull expression gave place to eagerness.

Gwenllian shot him a glance of surprised scorn.

"You don't mean that you would pay attention to anything *mamma* said! She is no more capable of understanding Louise!—"

Young Harry turned upon his cousin with an energy that took her by surprise.

"I tell you what it is, Gwenllian; it's a mistake for a girl like you to get into the habit of thinking she knows better than her mother. Of course Aunt Belle talks nonsense at times—so do all women," said the young lord of creation; "but for all that she knows the world, and she would understand the motives that might actuate a woman of—of intellect and understanding like Mrs. Owen, a great deal better than you ever could."

Gwenllian was too much amazed to answer.

She watched young Harry stooping over the croquet mallets with a very red face, and putting them away; and then she turned and ran up to her own room, where she locked herself in and cried as though her heart would break; telling herself that she was very glad indeed that her cousin was returning to duty next day, since he was in such a priggish and disagreeable mood.

Meantime, the visit of Lady Cadoc to the cottage was followed by a note from Miss Owen to Louise.

"Lady Cadoc has been here to call upon me. Of course it was very polite of her, though I must say I think she might have come sooner, and as you may suppose I took care that nothing in my manner should show her I was particularly pleased to see her. She must have found out that her coming was a matter of perfect indifference to me.

"She pumped me about you. Who your parents were and everything about them. Of course I was obliged to tell her the truth.

"She told me the old man was practically well again. Evidently you're not wanted at the Castle any longer, from what she said; and if you ask me, I must say I think your staying on there looks very odd."

CHAPTER XI

"To think that she should actually insist upon marrying my brother! and you said she was a really nice woman," said poor Lady Cadoc, weeping, to Dr. Morgan.

The doctor would fain have pointed out to her that even really nice women marry; but he felt that words were wasted upon the situation, and instead, prescribed soothing draughts, and two hours' daily massage, after luncheon; reflecting that this treatment would at once benefit her ladyship's figure, and ensure a certain modicum of peace to her family every afternoon.

"When you know her better you will be reconciled," was all he said.

"I shall never find a companion to my mind now, either," wailed Lady Cadoc. "I have been looking through the advertisement sheet of the *Morning Post*. They are all 'fond of games and would not mind travelling.' None of them ever advertises 'fond of work and would not mind stopping at home,' which would be so much more sensible and satisfactory. However, what is that compared to young Harry's prospects being utterly destroyed. And I do believe that if Gwenllian were disappointed in love, she is just the kind of girl to go and devote herself to dabbling in art for the rest of her life, and refuse to get married at all."

The meekness of Louise disarmed to some extent the hostility of Sir Harry's sister, who nevertheless lay awake night after night, hoping and praying that by some means, her brother's marriage, which she honestly regarded as a calamity, might be avoided.

Her own subtlety appeared to her almost Machiavellian when she suggested that in view of *les convenances*, it would be wiser that the engagement should not be announced to the world at large until the first year of Mrs. Owen's widowhood was completed.

"The less widely it is known the easier it will be to break it off," she reflected, but her conscience almost smote her when Louise assented so willingly to the proposition.

"I would not dream of announcing it. I think Sir Harry does not wish it either. I am only sorry Anna must know. But she has promised to say nothing to her mother for the present."

"No doubt you know the property is entailed," Lady Cadoc said, carelessly, "on the heirs male. Every halfpenny goes to young Harry, unless of course my brother had sons of his own, when young Harry, poor fellow, will get nothing."

Louise looked startled and distressed.

"I did not know. I never thought—I am so ignorant of the laws of property. Do you mean Sir Harry cannot leave his money to whom he chooses?"

"Nothing except his personality—what he may put by," said Lady Cadoc, "that cannot amount to much, I should imagine, Harry was always so open-handed."

She put the worst construction on the disap-

pointed expression of Louise. It did not occur to her that Mrs. Owen was distressed at the possibility of her marriage thus destroying the prospects of Sir Harry's nephew, the boy she liked so much, and who had shown her so much kindness and welcomed her so warmly into his uncle's house. Lady Cadoc had not the wit to see a thing so simple.

Because Mrs. Owen said very little, she suspected her of a duplicity too deep for words, and she reported quite sincerely to Gwennllian that Louise had been evidently upset when she learned that Sir Harry had no power to leave his property to her, even for her lifetime, unless she had a son.

Gwennllian received the information with scarcely concealed contempt; she loved Louise too well to be deceived in her, and was familiar with the workings of her mother's mind, and the faulty and extraordinary conclusions to which such workings usually led.

"As if Louise cared for money. You don't understand her a bit, Mamma," she said. "And as for poor Harry's being disinherited I should not think it very likely that Uncle Harry and she would have any children at all, at their age."

"That is all you know about it. I desire you will not express your opinion on such subjects, Gwennllian," said her scandalised parent.

Louise had feared that Anna would be pained by the news of her engagement, which she presently felt obliged to convey to her, since not only was it known to Dr. and Mrs. Morgan, but also to all the household at Morlais, and most of the inhabit-

ants of the village. But her fears proved quite unfounded.

"Why pretend? That's what I say," said Anna, with a bluntness that caused her sister-in-law to wince. "Everyone knows you can't really be sorry poor Frederick died, since everyone knows he was a burden to himself and to all around him. And of course it's a good marriage for you—in a way."

"In a way!" Louise echoed, with soft indignation.

"I mean he's rich, and a great landowner, and thought a lot of down here, and so on. Personally I can't see that it matters who a man is so long as he's a gentleman," explained Anna, with the air of one who believed her point of view to be original and even eccentric. "You need n't expect me, however, to think any more of you when you're Lady Gwyn than I do now; for if you do you'll be disappointed."

Louise sighed.

The vulgar obviousness of Anna's conversation had never wearied her more.

"Of course there are drawbacks," said Anna; this reflection appeared to afford her some slight consolation, "besides his being a widower—which naturally you can't complain of, being a widow yourself."

"I see no drawbacks."

"Why, he is an old man! I am nearly twenty years older than you are, but I can't say I should care to marry a man over sixty myself," said Anna, "if one must marry I should prefer a man of my own age, or even younger, if I could get him," with unvarnished honesty.

"He does not seem old to me, and if he did, I should not care for him any the less," said Louise. "It is the spirit, the soul, the answering understanding, one cares for."

"That is all nonsense," said Anna, sharply. "If you did n't happen to be rather good-looking—for those who admire dark people, which I've never disguised from you that I don't,—you can't pretend that this old man would have troubled his head about your soul or your spirit or anything else. If you do, its sheer self-deception, and so I tell you plainly."

Louise had nothing to say.

"What other drawbacks were you thinking of?"

"I'm sure I don't want to say unpleasant things," said Anna, "though if you ask me I feel bound to tell the truth. You know my way. I should think it a drawback to marry any man whose relations had a right to look down upon me."

"They have no right." Louise rose, and stood looking down with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, into her sister-in-law's plain face, which now assumed the expression of an obstinate bull-terrier.

"If you mean—as of course you do—my mother, you know nothing against her, except that she was very young and very poor and in a humble position. You have no evidence that she was n't respectable."

"We have no evidence that she *was*," said Anna, tartly. "Girls who sing in Parisian cafés are n't generally, I suppose. Why mince matters? As it happens, however, I was n't thinking of her, though I don't deny that's the worst of the lot, and I should think it was n't very pleasant for you to have to tell Sir Harry about it. That is if you *did*

tell him, but I know you're not over fond of saying things out, as I am."

"I told him," said Louise; her great dark eyes filled with tears, not because of Anna's words, but because she remembered so tenderly the moment of the telling and the manner of its reception. Sir Harry had had no reason to complain further of the reticence of Louise. Her innocent monotonous past lay unrolled before him as an open scroll.

"And what did he say?" asked Anna, suspiciously.

"If you must know, he said he didn't care a damn," said Louise, and the horrified expression of her sister-in-law's face moved her to hysterical laughter.

"I am sorry to hear he uses bad language," said Anna, when she had recovered from the shock.

"If it was n't my poor mother, Anna, what was it that I have to be so much ashamed of?"

"I should think if you had any delicacy of feeling, which I almost begin to doubt," said Anna, warmly, "that for Lady Cadoc to know that you have been getting two pounds a week, would be a very unpleasant hold for her to have over you."

"Anna," said Louise, gently, "it is quite impossible for us to understand each other. If you knew how proud I was of the first money I ever earned in my life!" She took out her purse, and unfolded a cheque, displaying the bold legible signature, "*Harry Tudor Gwyn*," to her astonished sister-in-law; "I carry it with me always, I think I shall have it framed," she said, smiling.

"I never heard anything so foolish and unpractical," said Anna, in disgusted accents. "Having

once chosen to accept it, you would pay it safely into the bank if you had any common sense; but that is just what I am afraid you will never get, Louise."

"I know it is not my strongest point," said Louise, smiling quite happily, "but Sir Harry has enough for us both, that is one comfort."

"He will need it, I am sure," said her sister-in-law.

"Anna, before I go—won't you congratulate me, and say you are glad I am so very very happy?"

"Glad is n't the word," said Anna, gruffly. "It's a load off my mind. I don't think you're at all the sort of person who is suited to live alone; and any kind of husband, however old, would be better for you than none."

Mrs. Morgan's congratulations were pleasanter to receive. She was delighted that her friend was to make such an excellent match; still more delighted because the engagement was to be kept secret for the present, which at once contented her notions of propriety and gratified her taste for mystery; and most of all delighted because she had persuaded her husband that it would be necessary for her to go to town and choose a present, and order herself a new gown for the wedding.

Mrs. Morgan loved shopping, and had a habit of buying inexpensive trifles which nobody wanted, and presenting them with not a little fuss and formality, to her embarrassed friends, who felt a dim intuition that they were expected to return these compliments in kind, and had no desire to incur the obligation.

Louise spent a very cheerful hour with her in the bright drawing-room, which was typical of its owner in the formality and elegance of its appointments; but even the harmless affectations of Mrs. Morgan were welcome after the exaggerated bluntness of Anna.

"To think we shall be neighbours! It is all too delightful," said Mrs. Morgan. "And you will make such a beautiful *châtelaine* of Morlais, dear Mrs. Owen. You will let me call you Louise now, won't you. I have often wished to do so before. I do hope you will let me advise you a little over your trousseau. Where are you thinking of getting it?"

Louise was obliged to confess she had not thought of her trousseau yet at all.

"Not thought of it!" said Mrs. Morgan, petrified, "and you are to be married in October!" Then she remembered her friend's widowhood, and apologised with anxious propriety. "Of course you have n't. It shows your nice feeling," she said, much disturbed at her own forgetfulness. "But—one might think out some suitable things that would n't jar too much on one's feelings. Pale mauve, or lilac, or grey. I dare say you won't like to wear colours for some time to come."

"I will ask you to help me. Your taste is so much better than mine. I should like to have some pretty things, and to look nice," Louise said. "He does not like black."

"Of course not; and after October, you know you need not," said Mrs. Morgan. "Oh, my dear, how little we thought when you came here! For I asked the doctor, and he said the idea never even

entered his head. It was not that he thought Sir Harry too old," she hastened to explain, "but that he had shut himself up so entirely, no one ever thought he would marry again. My dear! I do hope you'll have that great picture in the hall removed. It makes one melancholy every time one looks at it; and it is so lifelike."

"Oh never—never. I should feel it a disloyalty to her memory," said Louise, in low vehement tones.

"You must remember it is you who must come first now, you think too little of yourself—the doctor says it is your only fault," said Mrs. Morgan, whose good opinion of Mrs. Owen was gathering force, like a rolling snowball, though it would attain its full proportions only when she should be actually married to Sir Harry Gwyn.

"No, no, I do not come first. I must be always second. I am willing and glad it should be so. It makes me feel it less unequal—I cannot explain. Pray, pray say no more about it," Louise said, so earnestly that her friend was silenced.

It was a relief after all, in spite of Mrs. Morgan's kindness, to return to Morlais—to the companionship of the lover who understood her; and who held her feelings, as she held his memories, sacred.

Sir Harry was now so fully restored to his normal health that he troubled no more to take those precautions against any recurrence of his malady, which were still advised by his physician.

The beauty and dryness of the summer had greatly aided his restoration; and the only difference discernible since his illness was the fact that

he became easily fatigued if he attempted to walk long distances.

He spent almost the whole day out of doors, and during a spell of unusually hot weather insisted upon sitting out in the garden after dinner; because he declared it suffocated him to remain in the drawing-room, where Lady Cadoc, with closed windows and drawn curtains, and feather wrap about her large bare shoulders, sat and complained of the chilliness of stone-built houses.

"It will not hurt him, in this weather," said the doctor, shrugging his shoulders. "But at the least sign of damp or chill, bring him in."

"It is all very well to say bring him in," Louise said, with a smile half rueful, half comic.

"Come in yourself then," said the doctor, drily. "You know best whether he will follow."

Gwenllian had departed to pay a short round of visits, and young Harry had not been at Morlais since the first days of his uncle's engagement.

It was scarcely surprising if Lady Cadoc complained of the dulness of the Castle, for she hardly saw her brother and his fiancée from morning till night, except at meals.

"The glass is falling—it will be the last of these tropical nights," said Sir Harry, who like most country gentlemen, considered himself an infallible weather prophet. "The stars will be worth looking at, and I will give you another lesson in astronomy, Louise. Come out with me."

She followed him willingly into the banqueting hall, and through the open doorway under the low arch which led to the enclosure.

They passed out into the soft absolute stillness of the summer night.

The long path before them gleamed whitely in the darkness; the trees were outlined in shadowy hue against a pale clear sky; the moon was partially obscured by thin silvery clouds floating slowly across her surface.

As their eyes became accustomed to the darkness, the white of the jasmine, the shapes of the bushes, and the stone urns upon their pedestals, and the steps guarded by yews fantastically clipped—all became faintly visible.

Sir Harry guided Louise to the little arbour that faced the fountain, and she glanced fearfully about the old garden-enclosure, shrouded by the silent mystery of a summer night,—metamorphosed into a world of ghosts and shadows, wherein he and she were the only living creatures.

Words were unnecessary to express the delightful consciousness of each other's presence; of combined solitude and companionship; as they sat for a long while silent in the darkness; warm hand clasped in warm hand.

Presently the last silvery veil fled over the moon's surface, and melted into space; the moon shone forth in full brightness, and flooded the little arbour and the grass heavy with dew, and the straight paths and tall tree-tops alike, with clear white light that made the shadows blacker yet.

A melancholy possessed Louise in the midst of happiness; it was as though her lost youth called to her mockingly from the shadows. Her soul was filled with regrets for the days which had been empty of love; for the wasted beautiful days which

she might have given to this man who loved her, had fate called her to his side ten years earlier. She sighed over the recollection of her girlhood's bloom for ever vanished, paled and atrophied in a sick-room like a flower deprived of sunshine. She had never regretted—scarcely realised its loss until now, when she would have fain brought her lover every charm she had ever possessed. In vain she reproached herself; an impalpable grief brought tears in the midst of happiness. Though she had reason, full measure and overflowing, for gladness in the present, her vagrant fancy wandered repining into the past—that land of regrets.

Unconsciously she sighed aloud, and his voice broke the silence.

Louise told him her thoughts as frankly as a child; to him alone in all the world had she ever found it possible to speak frankly, as it was to her alone that he had ever found it possible to speak of his sorrow.

"The years that are left belong to us—let us make the most of them," he said. "Of what avail to fret over what cannot be helped. Look up, Louise. Do you remember all I told you last night?"

"I remember, but it saddens me. It makes the lives of human beings appear so infinitesimally small and insignificant to think of the immensity of space, and to behold those innumerable worlds all slowly, slowly passing on their destined course from earliest formation to ultimate decay."

"Yet, knowing that they are but passing shadows in the pageant of time, men and women cling to each other, promising eternal fidelity. Strange, is it not?" he said with a bitter intonation.

"Because they feel their souls to be immortal," she said dreamily.

Sir Harry lifted her hand to his lips in silence.

"One would think that on such nights as these the spirits of the beloved dead must be very near us," she murmured, pressing more closely to his side. "Oh Harry, speak to me—of her—to-night. There is a picture which haunts me sometimes—do you know it? It is called *L'oubliée*. I have felt I could kill the woman who fills the place of that sad ghost—and yet."

"She is never forgotten. If she is conscious of anything she knows that," he said simply. "It is different, dear, that is all. Another thing—" he hesitated, "there is no disloyalty in what I am going to say, dear, for the truth can never be disloyal—Alice was not fanciful as you are; nor perhaps—" he gave a short conscious laugh—"as I am myself, though it may seem strange that a man of my age should not have had the fancifulness knocked out of him long ago. She would not have imagined a tie between two spirits binding them together after this life was over. She would have pointed to the words of the marriage-service, *Till death us do part*, and rested there content. That is why I am haunted by no feelings of unfaithfulness towards her—as I should be towards you, my Louise, after the thoughts and vows we have exchanged. But my grief for my lost angel does not fool my imagination into thinking that we were bound, she and I, by the same extraordinary sympathy and understanding that exists between *us*. Her soul dwelt apart from mine in a happy region of calm unthinking faith; but mine stands face to face with

yours on another level. God knows whether it is a higher or a lower. I know only that you seem to me my second self—the companion I have dreamt of vaguely all my life—thus as it were miraculously come to share its closing years. Though they must be comparatively few, saddened perhaps by broken health, and necessarily by failing powers and spirits, yet you are willing to be my wife.”

“I love you, Harry,” she said passionately. “I ask no better fate than to be with you always. When you are ill I will nurse you—when you are sad I will comfort you, when you’re merry, I will laugh with you. If you must die first—it shall be in my arms. I will be such a wife to you as never man had yet.”

“I know it, dear,” he said simply, “that is your greatest charm, you make yourself always that which one desires and wishes you to be.”

“My only fear is—that you should grow tired—that you should be disappointed in me.” She clung to him shuddering.

“It is impossible. I know you too well. As I lay in that shadowy world between life and death, my consciousness of your devotion never wholly faded, so enveloping was your care, and so constant your tenderness. In the night I feigned sleep whilst in reality I watched your tall beautiful figure gliding about the room. You were so graceful that every movement gave me pleasure. Yes, your beauty pleased me even when I was in pain and least able to take pleasure in anything. But the beauty of your character, your patience and gentleness and simplicity pleased me even more than the beauty of your face. And in all our inter-

course, our intimate association, you have never yet uttered a word that vexed or jarred upon me."

"Oh hush, hush, you don't know me—I have many faults."

"I know you and I have found none. Tell me one."

"I could tell you many, but the worst of all is that I am weak—I am not brave. I have none of the courage that belongs to great natures."

But Sir Harry, though he was sixty years old, was in love. He laughed at this revelation.

"A man does not quarrel with a woman for want of courage, dear," he said, and put his arm tenderly about her.

In that shelter she rested, content, yet reflecting fearfully upon the mingled enthusiasm and sensitiveness of the man who loved her thus. She thought how fatally easy it would be to utter the unworthy thought, the tactless word, which might destroy the perfection of the image he had formed in her likeness.

"To me it is a painful exhibition that people of that age should care to go roaming about in the moonlight like a lovesick boy and girl; when one has only been a widow ten months and the other is on the wrong side of sixty," said Lady Cadoc. "If I behaved as my poor dear brother Harry is now behaving people would say I had gone out of my mind; and I should consider they had every justification; and yet, when all is said and done, I am two and a half years younger than he is."

CHAPTER XII

GWENLLIAN returned to Morlais in the last days of August, and young Harry appeared in time for the partridge shooting, and found to his astonishment that his uncle was able to go out with him on the first of September, though he limited his sport to the morning, but this was obviously because he could not bear to be longer absent from the side of Louise.

To add to the perplexity of poor Lady Cadoc, young Harry appeared once more to be paying attention to his cousin, and she hardly knew whether to be vexed or pleased; for since his inheritance had become a matter of doubt, she had reflected more earnestly than before upon the disadvantages attending the marriages of first cousins; while at the same time, in her fears lest Gwenllian should really throw off all restraint at the age of one and twenty and become an independent and eccentric Bohemian, she felt she would be glad to see her married to almost anyone.

"It is extraordinary to me that people should ever wish to have children at all," she sighed, "when I think how simple life would be without them."

She was consoled by the hints Sir Harry dropped concerning his intentions and his ability to provide liberally for young Harry in case of—contingencies.

"And young Harry is a good fellow, very steady and promising. Everyone says he will rise. Perhaps after all—there will be no—contingencies," said the poor lady. "I am sure I hope there won't be."

The doctor drove over to Morlais a day or two after young Harry's advent, and was detained in the banqueting hall by Lady Cadoc, while she poured the above reflections into his unwilling ear.

Since she would never have noticed, nor indeed believed, that the attention he lent was unwilling, he was at length obliged to say in plain words that he was anxious to speak to Mrs. Owen.

"Is she with Sir Harry? I have brought the plans of the cottage-hospital he has promised to build, and she is to go over them with him."

"I hope they are not too elaborate, but he always does things *en prince*," said Lady Cadoc, discontentedly. "You will find Louise in the enclosure. The hottest day is never too hot for her; she sits and basks in the sun like a lizard. It is extraordinary that they should have the same taste that way. But perhaps she is only doing it to please him. No woman can enjoy spoiling her complexion."

The doctor made his excuses and left Lady Cadoc sitting over the log fire in the great hall.

He found Louise in the garden.

"How glad I am to see you. Did you ever know such a morning?" she said, giving him her hand, with a radiant smile.

He sat down by her side.

All the beauty of summer was crowded into the loveliest of September days; the consciousness of the

near approach of autumn intensified the pleasure it gave to both gazers upon the scene.

A brilliant sun, and a still mild air; a haze upon the distant valley, bathing the rounded outlines of the heavily foliaged trees in a faint golden mist.

A blaze of colour surrounded Louise in her sombre draperies, but these served to accentuate the beauty of her noble figure and grave straight features. The brilliant hues of the surrounding borders, threw the darkness of her colouring into bold relief. In the calceolarias and montbretias and gladioli which flamed above the lowly edging of the blue lobelia, yellow deepened to orange and orange to glowing scarlet.

The Virginia creeper which curtained the entrance to the Castle, was touched with crimson, and the red geraniums glowed in grey stone urns, trailing splashes of colour and variegated leaves upon their moss-grown pedestals.

The arbour was weighted with a heavy mantle of purple clematis.

The fragrant lavender bushes struck a lighter note; and of waxlike purity were the innocent faces of the anemones, level with the standard roses. But the warmth of colour was repeated in the tall hollyhocks, the dahlias, and the armies of golden sunflower.

Honeysuckle and sweetbriar filled the air with regrets for a springtime past; and the lowly aster and pansy crept over the brown earth, weaving almost unnoticed their rainbow carpet about the feet of their prouder brethren.

Against the walls of the old building were peaches and apricots, almost visibly softening to

the wooing of the warm and heavy air. A hedge of fuchsia hung great purple and crimson bells over the path, and a tree-hydrangea drooped tresses of snow above the clean-shaven turf.

The pigeons whirled and flew around the turrets in the blue of space; a superb peacock butterfly floated lazily by, and the robin raised his cheerful note and sang rapturously from a dark pointed fir.

What a glow! What a heat! What tranquillity of beauty and peace.

He looked at Louise, and in the gladness of her great dark eyes, and the loveliness of her smile, read her happiness, and said, almost involuntarily:

"Your lot has fallen among pleasant things—at last."

"Dearest and kindest friend," she said, and the tears filled her eyes, "I am so grateful. I do not know how to be grateful enough." She paused and added earnestly. "I owe my happiness to *you*. Do not imagine, if I have seemed ungrateful during these last weeks, that I have been forgetful—it was only that I could not ——"

"Do you think I do not understand? I, who know you both?"

"Yet I feel as though I had failed you; whom I wanted to help and serve. I have wanted to see you, to talk to you, but I think he does not know what you told me? And I dared not speak of it without your leave."

"Of my state of health? No living being knows but you and the specialist I consulted. Why, do you wish to tell him? Can you keep no secret from him now?" with a gentle raillery in his tone.

"It is not that," said Louise colouring, "but his not knowing makes it difficult."

The doctor took her hand kindly.

"Difficult for him to see any reason why you should want to spare some of your happy hours to come over and cheer me with your companionship? My dear, there is no reason. I do not ask it. That you should have found your happiness is quite enough for me. It has drawn one more sting from death. I worried myself about your future, but the care of it has been taken out of my hands. I am content, more than content. After all, I have my wish, for you will be near me now, till the end, I hope." He changed his tone. "But I came to ask you a favour."

"Anything in the world," she said, wondering.

"Will you share some part of your happiness with another?"

He hesitated, and then drew out his pocket-book, and from this a newspaper cutting, and held it, folded, for a moment.

"You know we get the newspapers at Brach-y-Gwynt earlier than you do—through being so much nearer to the station. No one here has seen them yet, I suppose. I read this, and came at once to find you, for I heard the shots echoing down the valley, and guessed Sir Harry would be out."

"He will be back for luncheon," said Louise, "but I shall not see much of him this afternoon, for he is obliged to attend some Committee meeting at four in Llandandras. So I said I would go over and see Anna."

She took the little cutting, and read it, changing colour as she read.

It was an announcement from the *Morning Post* that Mrs. Howel Rosser was leaving Green's Hotel, Clifford Street, and would sail for the Argentine on the following Thursday.

This was Tuesday.

The doctor watched her.

"It has come to my knowledge quite recently, and indirectly, that this poor thing heard that her father was dangerously ill, and leaving her husband and children, came all the way from South America in the hope of seeing him again. That she wrote to him and that he did not answer her letter. Now I see this announcement. What do you gather from it?"

"That she hopes he may see it and relent even at the last moment. It is a final, despairing effort," said Louise, pitifully.

"Aye—so it struck me. I might have known you would see it as I did. Poor Margaret," said the doctor, in softened tones. "But I am afraid that if her letter did not move him, neither will this paragraph, though he will know the meaning of it as well as you or I."

Louise was folding and unfolding the paper nervously, then she returned it to him, but without meeting his eyes.

"You want me to show it to Sir Harry," she murmured.

"I want you to do much more. I want you to exercise all your influence, to exhaust all your entreaties—to make it a personal favour to yourself that Sir Harry shall see his child before she sails."

There was a pause. Louise sat still; then she

lifted her heavy-lidded long-lashed eyes, and looked her friend in the face.

"Dr. Morgan, I am afraid."

"Afraid? Of him?"

"Of him? Maybe, but most of all of risking this wonderful happiness which has come to me. You will think me selfish. I am not. I am *not*. I want to help Margaret. But it is the one and only subject on which his lips have been sealed to me. He has spoken of his wife, often, of his daughter, never."

"If you want, as you say, to help Margaret, *you* will speak," said the doctor, with emotion.

"I will. I will. But why must it be now? A voyage is nothing in these days. When I am his wife I shall have more influence with him. I will gain his forgiveness for her then. How can I go and ask him favours now? He might resent it. He might be angry and that would kill me."

"You know so little of men!" said the doctor, with a melancholy smile, "as to believe that you will ever in all your life possess again, the power you possess now over the man who loves you and has not yet made you his own? Believe me, Louise, there is no favour too great for you to ask or for him to grant, at this moment."

She looked at him again, irresolute, doubtful—but with a lovely colour mounting in her face.

"Do not fail me," he entreated. "Do not let this opportunity go by of reconciling father and child. Life is uncertain, and the same chances seldom offer twice. If as you say, you found your happiness through my agency, however unconscious,

give me before I die the happiness of knowing that you are worthy of it."

As she looked at the doctor's face, already visibly wasted, with scanty grey hair falling upon hollow temples; at the kind, sunken hazel eyes wistfully fixed upon hers—Louise knew that she could not refuse what he asked. That she could not.

Silently she held out her hand for the paper.

Sir Harry and his nephew came into the great hall, ruddy and cheerful, in their rough shooting suits, guns in hand.

"How many did you get?" asked Gwenllian, raising her head from her book.

"Twenty brace, but we had a lot of walking," said young Harry. "Is luncheon ready?"

Sir Harry walked past them into the library, where he knew Louise would be waiting for him.

She started up as he entered, and came forward, laying a bundle of papers upon his writing-table.

"Well, we've had a long tramp, but I'm not a bit tired," he said triumphantly. "What have you been doing with yourself all the morning, my darling?"

"Dr. Morgan came over, and I have been in the garden—he brought the plans of the village hospital—I have them here."

"That's all right, we will look them over together."

"Have you seen the London papers?" said Louise faltering.

He looked at her in surprise.

"No, I came straight to you. Why?"

She moved to his side, and put her hand entreatingly into his.

"Harry, I have a favour to ask you. Will you grant it?"

"To the half of my kingdom," he said smiling. "Don't look so frightened."

"I am frightened because I am trenching on forbidden ground," she murmured.

"There is nothing you may not say to me," he answered gently.

With fingers that shook nervously, she unfolded the little cutting and gave it to him.

Sir Harry read it, and drew his brows together.

"Well?"

The change in his tone brought tears to her eyes.

"Ah, don't be angry with me. I could n't bear it," she said, almost sobbing. "I have never asked you anything before, Harry. I ask you this—to forgive her and let her come home. We are so happy. Let her be happy too."

He was visibly softened by her distress, and perceiving this, she put entreating hands upon his arm, aiding the eloquence of her pleading voice and eyes by her caressing touch.

He drew her closer to him. It was clear, after all, that he could not be angry with her. The heart of Louise throbbed with gratitude, triumph, and answering love.

"Do you know the circumstances?"

"I think so. Dr. Morgan told me."

"He knows. Did *he* bring you this cutting?" said Sir Harry quickly and suspiciously.

"He brought it to me," she said simply. "He thought, and so did I, that it looked like a last

despairing appeal to you to send for her before she sailed. He told me also that it had come to his knowledge that she came all the way from South America to try and see you when you were so ill, that she had written to you and received no answer."

"He was misinformed in the last particular. I answered the letter. I think also that he and you are mistaken in supposing this paragraph to be an appeal to me. Unless she has altered very much she would not appeal to me again after the letter I wrote in answer to hers."

His tone was so grim as to leave Louise in no doubt as to the nature of his answer.

"Perhaps she has altered very much. Time and distance—alter people," she murmured.

"Do you know I took an oath, when her mother's life paid the penalty of her heartlessness, that I would never willingly see nor speak to her again as long as I lived."

"You were not yourself when you took that oath," said Louise, and laid her cheek caressingly against the rough tweed shoulder of his shooting jacket. "And if you had been such oaths are better broken than kept."

"Is a man's word not sacred?" he said, half angrily.

"No unholy words, no vow made in anger can be sacred," Louise said. "Oh, Harry, your heart is warm and generous—you cannot—you cannot be so unforgiving."

She thought of a day when she might perhaps be pleading for herself—for that he could be unreasonable, resentful—even hard—in proportion to

the depth of the feelings that possessed him at the moment, she well knew. The thought made her none the less earnest in her championship of the absent and unknown Margaret.

He stood, twisting his grey moustache with a vexed impatient expression.

"I wish this had not been put into your head," he said at last. "Why, just when I am happy at last, must all the old feelings be raked up again? Don't you think it's rather cruel?"

She caressed his arm timidly, but gave him no answer in words, and his expression softened once more as he looked at the beautiful downcast face.

"You'll think me an unnatural brute, Louise, but I won't hide my feelings from you. I'll tell you the truth. Apart from all else, I don't wish to see Margaret. She was her mother's idol, not mine." His tone sounded bitter. "I saw nothing of her when she was little, and as she grew up I thought her a strange sullen reserved kind of girl. We had nothing in common. I don't understand why she should want to come. An only daughter and a widowed father sounds a romantic combination." He laughed harshly. "Well—there's no romance in this case. She is very well off and wants nothing from me nor I from her. Her children could not be my heirs even if I wished them to be, which I certainly do not. To see her, if I let her come, would only fill me with painful memories, it wouldn't mean that I had forgiven her. I don't forgive easily, dear."

"I know, and that frightens me," said Louise. "I wish you could forgive her. But if you can't, at least, at least, take pity on her, and let her come

as she wishes, if only for a moment, that she may not go back on her long long journey disappointed and sorrowful."

The prosaic clang of the luncheon gong interrupted them, causing Sir Harry to utter an impatient ejaculation.

Louise moved reluctantly towards the door; he followed her, kissed her hastily, and opened it for her to pass through.

"We will speak of this later," he said. "Tell my sister not to wait for me. I must go and change, for I ordered the dog-cart immediately after luncheon."

CHAPTER XIII

THOUGH breakfast was occasionally served in the great hall, and especially in the summertime, Lady Cadoc preferred to have luncheon in the more modern dining-room, which she found at once less draughty and more cheerful.

It proved rather a silent meal upon this occasion, for Sir Harry was preoccupied and scarcely spoke, even to Louise, who sat at his right hand; and Lady Cadoc, evidently noting his abstraction, was nervous and constrained. Louise was convinced that she, too, had observed the paragraph in the *Morning Post*.

The chatter of Gwennlian and the occasional remarks of young Harry relieved the silence of their elders; but since it was to them evident that their uncle was out of humour, they were exceedingly glad when luncheon was over.

They had coffee in the hall, and then young Harry took his gun, and started forth again, and Lady Cadoc rose to get ready for her drive.

"My dear, it's too hot for you to walk to the Hafod and back. Gwennlian and I have to start early for an archery meeting. Let us drop you on our way through Glascwm. I *must* stop at the Post-office."

Louise hesitated.

She had hoped to have a word with Sir Harry before she started on her walk; and had half expected that he would make some excuse to invite her to return to the library.

But on leaving the dining-room he seated himself at once before the great writing-table in the hall, and began to write a letter; nor had he looked up since.

"Thank you," she said, "perhaps it is too hot. I shall enjoy the walk back in the cool of the evening all the more if I am not tired."

She left the hall with Lady Cadoc and Gwenlian, dressed quickly, and returned with as little delay as possible; that she might give him the opportunity at least, of speaking to her alone, if he wished.

Sir Harry was writing still, when she returned; and Griffiths was collecting and removing the coffee-cups.

Sir Harry glanced twice impatiently towards him. He appeared to be unaccountably slow in his movements.

At last he left them alone.

Sir Harry folded a double sheet of the thick note-paper, enclosed and addressed it, and stamped it with a big seal bearing his coat of arms.

Louise watched him; this man had grown so dear, so very dear to her, that even to watch him thus, to observe the impatient decisive movements characteristic of him, made her heart beat faster, and brought a little smile of mingled tenderness and amusement to her lips.

He rose with a sudden gesture of relief, and came quickly across the hall to her.

"Did I hear you say you were to be dropped at the Post-office, that you were going to Glascwm?" he said. "I am driving in the opposite direction. Will you post this for me?"

He put the letter into her hand, in a way that showed her she was to read the superscription.

She did so, feeling assured that she would see Margaret's name, and uttered a little soft sound of gratitude.

"How can I thank you?"

"It is to please *you*," he said. "I can refuse you nothing, Louise. It may be weakness—or my best strength. Mind, I'm acting against my own judgment, and my own wishes." She looked wistfully at him, as he said these words; half repenting her own insistence—"but I don't believe it will lead to anything, after my last letter to her. Feeling as I do, I can't wish it should—I *can't*. However, *if* she gets this letter in time, and *if* she chooses to abandon her voyage and come, I'll break my oath, for your sake, and see her. We'll leave it at that, dear, you mustn't ask more."

She kissed the hand that gave her the letter, and then started, for she looked up to see Griffiths standing in the heavily curtained archway that led to the front door, upon the thick Turkey carpet which had rendered his approach noiseless.

"The dog-cart is at the door, Sir Harry."

Louise went with her lover through the stone-vaulted outer hall, and watched him take the reins from the groom, and climb into the dog-cart. He lifted his cap to her, smiled, and drove away, just as the barouche appeared upon the road leading from the stables.

Louise lingered for a moment, and then went slowly back to the banqueting hall.

She laid her hand upon the heavy tapestry curtain in the archway, and lifting it, beheld Lady Cadoc and Gwenllian standing before the log-fire; simultaneously she perceived that Lady Cadoc was showing Gwenllian the paragraph in the *Morning Post*, and heard her words, uttered with almost a sob.

"And I've heard from Sophia, and she says Margaret has grown into the living image of her poor beautiful mother, and that if only Harry could see her, she believes it would bring him back to his senses in a moment, and cure him of his ridiculous infatuation for *that woman*."

Lady Cadoc was as much startled by the approach of Louise, as Louise had been, five minutes since, by the noiseless entrance of Griffiths.

"Good heavens! how you made me jump," she cried, turning red, and crumpling the newspaper in her hand, "I had no idea you were down."

She thought Louise looked paler than usual, and though she hoped she had not been overheard, yet she could not help feeling an inward uncomfortable conviction to the contrary.

"I was watching for you to come down the stairs," she said, trying to laugh as naturally as possible. "One never hears anyone come through that archway; I am almost sorry I insisted upon the curtain being hung there. It has made scarcely any difference to the draught."

"I went to see Sir Harry off," said Louise in a low tone. "Do you know—if I may change my mind, I think I would rather walk down to the vil-

lage after all. It is not so hot as it was, and I believe I need more exercise."

"Just as you like. I would n't press you for the world. I only wish I could walk with you," said Lady Cadoc, anxiously trying to atone for her unlucky indiscretion by an added amiability of manner.

Gwenllian would fain have lingered for a word with her divinity, but the expression of Louise did not invite her to do so. She looked pale, and the gravity of her face added sternness to her severely beautiful features. Gwenllian therefore contented herself with a caressing and sympathetic murmur of farewell, as she followed her parent out to the carriage.

Louise glanced round the great empty hall, where only the loud ticking of a standard clock broke the silence.

There was an ominous whiteness around her nostrils and lips, and her dark eyes were burning. She was angry with the intense still anger of a meek woman not easily roused to wrath.

The contemptuous words rang in her ears:

"Cure him of his ridiculous infatuation for that woman."

Lady Cadoc had shown the utmost friendliness to her, had latterly even flattered her incessantly, yet this was how she and her sister dared to write and to speak of her behind her back. For this had she risked bringing the displeasure she feared more than death itself, upon her head, in her effort to bring his child back to Sir Harry—against his wish.

She had forced him to do a thing he hated, for the sake of the woman whose likeness to her dead

mother would bring him to his senses, and cure his absurd infatuation.

She put her hand to her throat feeling as though her anger would suffocate her, and flung the letter into the heart of the flames that leaped about the great logs on the open hearth.

"I will not accept the favour you granted me so unwillingly, Harry," she said. "I will not risk my happiness, nor yours, to please them, or to please anybody, and when you come home this evening I will tell you so."

With the burning of the letter the intensity of her anger faded, leaving her almost faint with the fierceness of its momentary hold upon her being.

"I will go out into the fresh air—and recover myself," she thought, trembling still.

She passed the great picture, and the calm gaze of the dead woman's portrait appeared to follow her.

Not, to her fancy, reproachfully, but as though wondering, *Why are you disturbed? Why such frenzy of passion about this small thing? A little while,—and you, and he, and my child, will all be even as I am. . . .*

Louise went forth, through the front entrance, where the servants were engaged in putting away rejected wraps and parasols.

Griffiths was laughing with Lady Cadoc's maid, who had been sent for at the last moment to bring a forgotten cushion for her mistress; but all became preternaturally grave at the appearance of Sir Harry's betrothed wife, scattering immediately on their respective ways.

Louise walked down the drive, and the fresh cool air of the afternoon revived her; but she was not happy.

She longed for the moment of Sir Harry's return; for explanation, and the assurance that he understood her action. If he regretted it, though it would be too late to send another letter, there would be plenty of time to send a telegram. She did not think Sir Harry would regret it; nevertheless, as her anger died within her, she wished very heartily that she had not burnt the letter.

Her revengeful feelings faded into sadness, for Lady Cadoc's tone, no less than her words, had wounded her to the quick, and mortified her cruelly; the more so since Louise, in her simplicity had almost believed in her smooth words, and her apparently frank acceptance of the engagement; had even counted her as a friend.

"And all the while she was lamenting over *him* and sneering at *me*—with her sister," she thought, with burning face, and tearful eyes. "But why should I care? Harry does not hide his contempt for her. I have thought him hard upon her, but I see now that he was justified. Still, I will not betray her, nor make mischief between them. He would never forgive her. He does not forgive easily. I will only tell him I repented asking the favour he granted against his will. And I do repent. It was not I, but Dr. Morgan, who would have forced him to act against his own feelings and his own judgment."

With these reflections she endeavoured to soothe her troubled mind, filled as it was with uneasy visions of Dr. Morgan's disappointment, and of that

long mournful journey which lay before the woman who had travelled from the other side of the world, in the hope of seeing her father once more.

Louise went to the Post-office and bought some stamps; paid a visit to Anna, and proposed walking up to the doctor's house, but was informed that he and his wife had also left home early for the archery meeting.

She cut her visit as short as possible, and hurried back to Morlais; upon this occasion she took very little heed of the beauties of the wayside. Upon arrival she was relieved to hear that Sir Harry had not yet returned. She would not go up-stairs and remove her walking things, but hovered about uneasily, waiting for him.

Tea was laid before the fire in the hall, and presently Lady Cadoc and Gwennlian came in, chattering of their party, and of the chilliness which had come over the later hours of the day, after the lovely promise of the morning.

Louise owned that it was chilly. She moved to the ingle-nook, which commanded a view of the entrance.

Young Harry returned from his shooting, tired and rather cross. He had had very poor sport, he said. Uncle Harry always had all the luck. His entrance caused a slight commotion and interest, and he sat before the fire, scorching his face and enjoying his tea.

At last Sir Harry came.

He greeted Louise only with a smile; but a smile so glad and tender, and full of affectionate under-

standing, that her happiness returned upon her with a rush.

He answered his sister's enquiries with assurances that he had not felt it to be cold, and that he was none the worse for his drive. He coughed once or twice however, slightly, in order, Gwenllian said, to arouse sympathy and to make sure Louise should not think he was quite well again. His good humour was evidently restored, for he laughed heartily at the small pleasantry. As he brought his tea to the side of Louise, she murmured, "I want to speak to you," and he responded at once.

"I must rest before dinner. This is the longest day out I've had yet. Will you come and sit by me in the library?"

This arrangement was too usual to cause comment, and he led the way to his study a few minutes later. As soon as Louise entered he closed the door and took her into his arms.

"My darling—you must have thought me a surly grudging brute. I've been abusing myself all the way to that confounded meeting and back again. I did n't want to write that letter, and yet do you know, that when your dear hand dropped it into the post, it took a tighter hold of my heart than it ever had yet, and that's saying a good deal."

His voice broke into an unsteady laugh, and the words she tried to utter died on her lips as he kissed them.

"I don't want to see Margaret. Such a graceless brute am I, that I should be glad if the letter missed her altogether—but I want you to want me to see her. I love you for it. I worship you for it. I know now that no words in the world could

have bound you closer to me than your words of pleading for her. I know I couldn't bear to think you would have the faintest wish to keep us apart as another woman in your place might have had. There isn't a touch, not a hint, of meanness nor of jealousy in all your pure nature. When I think how you risked my anger which you fear so much, how you trembled—why you are trembling now, Louise," he pressed her more closely to him, "to ask a favour for another with no thought of yourself—I feel so grateful to God for your nobility, your generosity, your gentle charity,—for all your sweet virtues, and your crowning gift of love for me—that I could cry like a child—old fool that I am. Ah—don't, don't pain me by protesting. Don't try and dash my happiness in your perfection. Why should you?"

Why should she?

Why should she break the long happy silence that ensued upon Sir Harry's vehement outburst, when he threw himself into his deep easy chair, and drew her to her favourite low seat beside him? Why should she disfigure this beautiful hour with a faltering unnecessary confession of ugly thoughts and an ugly action?

For in the light of the halo wherewith his words invested her—those angry, jealous, revengeful feelings which led to the burning of the letter, suddenly assumed a horrible, sordid, unworthy aspect in her eyes.

And she could not doubt that the confession was unnecessary. No one could ever know that the letter was not posted; that it had not been lost at the hotel, or forwarded from thence to the Argen-

tine, and lost there. Sir Harry did not wish to see his daughter, and had only written the letter to please her. She could not feel that her action had wronged him, but she felt acutely that confession of her weakness might.

It was Margaret who was wronged. The fact remained that she would thus lose the chance of seeing her father before she sailed.

But if Louise could put that right—without disappointing or disillusioning him?

“Harry,” she said, surprised at the trembling of her own voice. “Suppose the letter—as you said—missed Margaret—suppose she had already left her hotel—would it not be as well to telegraph to the steamer, to Southampton.”

He roused himself from a reverie.

“No, dear,” he said decidedly, the obstinate note she was beginning to know so well, crept into his voice, “I won’t do that. I’ve given fate a chance; but I won’t telegraph, as though I wanted her when I don’t, more especially now, just before our marriage. I told you that you mustn’t ask me to do any more than I have done.”

Louise cast despairingly about in her own mind.

She felt that she must either salve her conscience, or yield to it.

“I will only ask one thing more,” she murmured, with beating heart.

“Well,” he said, with a faint inflection of impatience at her importunity; but her lips were laid upon his hand entreatingly and his displeasure died.

“If she does not come—if she sails without answering—or without getting your letter—may I write to her then, and tell her that—that we are

to be married in six weeks' time, and that she may come to us then when she will, and bring her children? I would put it so that she could not be offended," she said entreatingly.

"I'll be bound you would," said Sir Harry, with a short laugh. "Well—I'd rather she came then than now, if she must come. You may do that if you like, Louise. Now will you leave that subject alone? It's not one I care to talk about, and we've threshed it out sufficiently to-day, it seems to me."

Louise sat up till midnight penning that letter to the unknown Margaret.

By the time she had finished it, her mind was a little more at ease with itself.

She would carry it to Dr. Morgan on the morrow and ask for the address, for she did not believe Sir Harry knew it, even if she had cared to contemplate re-opening the subject with him. And she would explain to the doctor—as much as could be explained.

Perhaps everything—for he was kind, and sympathetic, and he knew Sir Harry—and would understand.

CHAPTER XIV

THROUGH the open window of the library came the sound of the croquet balls on the lawn. Gwenlian was playing a dutiful match with her parent.

Lady Cadoc, wearing a fur cloak to defend her from the mild September air, and a pair of goloshes in case the grass should be damp, sacrificed her inclinations to her health, which she imagined would benefit by the gentle exercise the game entailed.

Sir Harry sat in his favourite corner of the library, in the armchair next the window, smoking and reading.

He did not read the books the younger generation read, but harked back incessantly to the favourite writers of his youth.

Perhaps the books read in youth never quite lose the glamour that early fancy has shed over them; as he read, old thoughts and inspirations returned upon him, and made the words before him more convincing, the descriptions more vivid, the philosophy sounder, than a colder judgment might have found them.

He bent his grey head over the page, and forgot that it was grey; the autumn breeze floated in through the window, and lifted the silver hair from his forehead, and fanned his broad brow, where passing time had ploughed heavy furrows; the bees hummed in the border below the window; the

western sun caught the rough trunks of the Scotch firs in the far corner of the lawn, and turned them to a glowing copper red—an effect he usually loved to mark—but Sir Harry's thoughts were far away in the past, and for aught he knew of the present at this moment, he might have been once more the handsome boy whose pictured face, bold radiant blue eyes, and light active form hung opposite him upon the wall.

The opening of the door broke the spell.

He threw down the book with a hasty gesture, and looked up with a smile, expecting Louise, who had been walking with him, and had gone up-stairs to remove her hat before coming to sit with him as usual, in the library.

His servant Griffiths entered the room, and closed the door behind him, uttering the formula usual to him when addressing his master.

"Beg pardon, Sir Harry."

"What is it?"

He perceived that Griffiths was strangely nervous and ill at ease.

"Speak out if you've anything to say," said Sir Harry, impatiently but not unkindly.

"Beg pardon, Sir," said Griffiths again. "I thought you ought to see this, Sir Harry—I thought there might have been a mistake."

He held out the charred corner of an envelope containing an eight-fold enclosure of thick writing paper, which had partially escaped burning.

"I picked this out of the log-fire in the 'all yesterday, Sir Harry," said Griffiths, almost in a whisper.

Sir Harry was quick-witted. He put the mean-

ing of that charred letter, and of Griffiths' action, together, in a flash. His keen blue eyes glittered beneath his shaggy brows. But he spoke in a tone of ice that sent shivers down the spine of Griffiths, who feared his master's wrath exceedingly.

"What did you do that for?"

"Beg pardon Sir Harry—but I seed you writing," his lips were so dry that he spoke with difficulty "and—by accident as 't were, I came in just in time to see you give the letter—to Mrs. Owen—to post—and I thought, I says to myself, I—I thought——"

Sir Harry's gloomy piercing gaze never left his face, and he floundered miserably and broke down.

"I can't—tell you—no make-up story. I ain't no hand at lying. I've never told you nothing but the truth, Sir Harry, and I'll tell it now. I seed the paragraph in the paper about Miss Margaret. All of us saw it, there was n't one of us as did n't hope she'd be let—come back—and when I saw you writing to her——"

"You saw me writing to her?" said Sir Harry, swift as lightning. "You're lying now, sir. You never came near me when I was writing to her."

"I—I guessed you were writing to her," stammered Griffiths, then he was stung by Sir Harry's contemptuous look into speaking the truth.

"Well—I knowed it, then, because when you had gone out, I took the blotter, and I held it up to the Venetian mirror as hangs between the candelabra on the wall, and I read some of the words. And I heard you asking Mrs. Owen to post it—and when she went out I noticed she had n't got the letter in

her 'and, so I went to look and see if it was in the 'all post-box, and it was n't; and I found a heap of tinder on a log in the fireplace, and blew off the top, and found the fire had n't got right through. The bottom of the envelope had the last words of the address given in the *Morning Post*. So I made up my mind as you should see it."

"Why did n't you bring it to me yesterday?"

Griffiths looked at him, as though uncertain whether to reply or not.

"Answer me. Why did you wait till to-day?"

"I—I had to decide what to do all in a moment," said Griffiths, as though defending himself. "There was n't no hurry—I—I knowed the post would be gone before you came back."

"Will you speak out, sir, or will you not?" said Sir Harry in a voice of thunder.

"It ain't no good to keep nothing back once I've begun," said Griffiths, despairingly. "I wrote to Miss Margaret. I told her what you'd written to her, and how the letter had been destroyed—wilful—and so it was destroyed wilful; and I begged her to come all the same. I posted the letter to catch the same post as yours would have caught if it had been let. And I did n't tell you because I did n't know how you'd take what I'd done. I thought you might send her a telegraph and forbid her to come. Me being only a servant and having taken a liberty, Sir Harry, through not being able to see you put upon, and—and took in."

"Very well," said Sir Harry, in a voice of iron, "you've told me everything. Now I'll tell you something. You've made a fool of yourself. Mrs. Owen was carrying out my wishes when she burnt

that letter. I did not wish Mrs. Rosser to come, and if she comes I won't see her."

Griffiths bowed submissively, but a curious light shone in his eyes, and his expression said very plainly that here Sir Harry might be mistaken.

But there was no mistake in his master's next words spoken in the same quiet tones of icy determination.

"As for you, you'll take the eight o'clock train to London."

Griffiths turned white.

"I was afraid of this, Sir Harry. You're going to send me away."

"I'll have no spies in my house," said Sir Harry Gwyn.

The man attempted no remonstrance; he said in his usual submissive tones:

"Very good, Sir Harry."

"You've been a good servant to me—till now," said Sir Harry, quietly. "I had left you a sum of money in my will. When you get to London, you can report yourself to my solicitors, and as soon as you have decided what to do, they will advance you a portion, or the whole of that sum—at their discretion—to set you up in business. Or if you take another service, they will pay you the interest of the money until you retire."

"I'll never take another service," said Griffiths, in trembling tones. "I've served you for eight and twenty years, Sir Harry, and it ends like this. I've had enough of service."

"That will do, sir."

"Very good, Sir Harry. Shall I bring you my book, sir, or give it over to Charles? He'd be

the best to take my place. He knows your ways."

Sir Harry uttered a sound so expressive of exasperation that Griffiths waited for no further answer. He gave one last look—a look at once reproachful, affectionate and even admiring—at the gloomy and frowning face of Sir Harry, who stood towering over the writing table, obviously and impatiently waiting for his man's departure.

Then he went.

Sir Harry stood there for a long time without moving. He listened for the footsteps of Louise, but she did not come. As a fact she was afraid to come, for she had seen Griffiths go into the library, heard the sound of angry voices, and returned to the other end of the banqueting hall.

A vague uneasiness possessed her; she feared a domestic *fracas* was in process of happening; and Louise disliked unpleasantness as a cat hates water. But of the truth she had no faintest suspicion.

The door of the library opened hastily and Griffiths came into the hall.

He was unconscious of her presence until he was quite close to her, and then she perceived, to her consternation, that the man was crying.

She started to her feet in wonder and sympathy.

Griffiths had shared so much of the anxiety and work of nursing during Sir Harry's illness, that she could not regard him as an ordinary indifferent servant. She even felt a little indignation against Sir Harry, whose hasty temper or harshness must, she thought, have brought tears to the eyes of the usually alert and cheerful Griffiths.

But he seemed not to hear her timid word of in-

quiry; and went past her with a dejected mien,—away into the servants' quarters.

She lingered in the hall. Perhaps it would be better to give Sir Harry time to cool.

As a rule his vexation was short-lived. She was even aware of her own power to charm it away altogether upon occasion; but to-day she was herself a little melancholy and dispirited.

She had wished very much to see Dr. Morgan, and it had not been possible to do so, without a determined effort of which Louise was very little capable, with the decided wishes of Sir Harry to oppose her own. All day she had carried her letter to Margaret in her pocket, in case the doctor should come over to Morlais, when she hoped for an opportunity of asking him to read it, and to post it for her; but as it happened, he did not come.

Finally she had written him a note, asking him to remain at home the next morning, when she knew Sir Harry must be absent at Petty Sessions; and she consoled herself with the reflection that at least thus she would be sure of the chance of talking alone with her old friend, and receiving his advice and sympathy.

She glanced once more at the library door. If she did not go to him soon, she knew Sir Harry's impatience well enough to be sure he would presently come forth from his den and call her.

She smiled as the library door opened.

He saw her tall figure standing beside the long narrow board of the oak table, which ran half the length of the hall,—and came towards her with hasty steps.

She was moving forward to meet him, when she caught sight of his expression, and stopped short.

Sir Harry laid the charred corner of the letter she had never thought to see again, upon the table beside her.

He gave her a strange bitter look.

Her heart stood still. But despite the suddenness of the shock, her brain worked. She understood what had happened. It was Griffiths who had rescued that unburnt corner of the letter from the flames. She knew instantly that the man had accused her, that Sir Harry had defended her, and dismissed his servant; and that she, the idol, had fallen from her pedestal. But whether she would ever be forgiven, she did not know.

In the midst of the agony which this doubt caused her, she was beset with a wild impatience of the false position into which her own weakness, her vagueness of purpose, had betrayed her. Oh he must—he *must* understand.

And yet how unconvincing to-day would sound the words that yesterday could have been so easily spoken, so undoubtingly received.

“Harry—Harry—listen to me. Don’t look like that. I can’t—speak—I can’t think, when you look at me like that. I can explain.” Her voice sounded, even to herself, hoarse and far away, like the voice of a person speaking in a dream.

“For God’s sake, spare me explanations,” said Sir Harry, hastily and bitterly. “No words, however soft, however smooth, can explain away the fact that you let me think you posted that letter—and that it lies there. I believed in you, as I believed in God, and you deceived me. I’ve been a

fool. They say there's no fool like an old fool, don't they? But even an old fool may come to his senses. I've come to mine. My dream is over. I'm awake."

"Do you mean that if I tell you—how it happened—if *I* tell you—you won't listen to me, Harry?" she said with white lips. "Oh, it's not possible—it's not possible. How—how could I marry a man who did not believe my word?"

He shrugged his shoulders with a fierce scornful gesture of renunciation.

"You have said—" and with an angry bow he turned short upon his heel and walked away through the hall.

"Oh Harry, don't—you know—it's absurd—it is indeed—you *must* listen. Faint with the despair that possessed her, she put out her hand towards him as though to detain him, to beseech him to stay. To herself she was saying over and over again:

"I must think. I must be calm. I must tell him exactly how it was. Everything depends—my whole happiness and his—on his listening to me and believing me. I must collect my thoughts. He must n't go. I won't let him go."

The dark mist cleared from her eyes; she was leaning against the table, clinging to it for support, and Sir Harry was gone.

The charred fragment of the letter lay beside her hand, to convince her that the short unhappy scene had actually taken place, but the catastrophe had been so sudden that she could hardly yet realise it. Surely it was impossible that her happiness should thus have vanished suddenly, like a bubble,

into thin air. She tried to laugh, as she took the blackened envelope into her trembling hands.

The shrill voice of Lady Cadoc and the careless answering tones of Gwennllian came suddenly to her ears.

They had finished their game, and were advancing across the enclosure towards the archway that led into the hall.

Louise looked round for a way of escape. She opened the low heavy nail-studded door of the old chapel, and closed it noiselessly behind her. She must have time to reflect. She could not meet them now.

Instantly it was as though she had stepped into a different world—the dim sad world of a dead past.

At another time Louise would have been half afraid to shut herself alone into this dark mysterious melancholy place, with its shadowy monuments, and still damp atmosphere of chill and silence; for she possessed to the full the nervousness which often besets highly strung and imaginative natures.

But despair has no room for fear.

The chapel was little more than a vault; the low arched roof was supported by heavy pillars, and the narrow windows lighted it but dimly.

Until the last hundred years it had served as a burial place for the Gwyns, and was full of their effigies and tombs, in grey stone and white marble.

Now that burial here was no longer permitted, a great vault had been hewn in the rock without the walls and a mausoleum had been built there,

shrouded by a thickly-planted shrubbery; and accessible through the chapel.

Louise sank into a chair, for her knees were trembling under her; she tried to think, to realise what she must do next. But the shock had dazed her. She found herself gazing vaguely at the nearest tomb: an Elizabethan monument of a recumbent knight with a broken stone ruff about his neck, and his straight cold dame stretched beside him. Mechanically she read the inscription:

"To the memory of that noble knight Sir Harry Tudor Gwyn, heyre of the ancient family of the Gwyns, who put on immortality at Morlais in 1592 and to the memory of that example of undistayned virtue Gwenllian, wife to ye said Sir Harry Gwyn, who received the crowne of glory in the yeare of grace. who lived together in inviolated bands of holy wedlock 17 years, and multiplied themselves into 3 sonnes and 3 daughters. . ."

His dear familiar name inscribed in this place of the dead brought the sudden relief of tears. She knelt on the cold pavement beside the chair; and hiding her face on her arm, cried as she had never cried before; sobbing out, over and over again, like a child:

"I would have forgiven him if he had done a far worse thing. I would have forgiven him. How could he look at me like that? How could he speak to me so? Oh, what foolish foolish thing have I done to bring this about?"

The outburst of weeping, of passionate murmured reproaches, relieved her though it exhausted her.

She rested motionless upon her knees; her head

was clearer; she felt able to think. That curious sub-consciousness which is almost a sixth sense, suddenly made her aware that she was not alone.

With a start, she lifted her face, and saw a lady standing by the carved oak screen before the altar.

Louise would have recognised her among a thousand, from the startling vivid resemblance of her face to the face of the portrait in the hall.

She looked at her, and at the charred corner of the letter still crushed in her trembling hand.

Then she rose from her knees, and almost involuntarily uttered aloud one word.

“Margaret!”

CHAPTER XV.

"Yes, it is Margaret. And I think you are Mrs. Owen?"

Louise bowed her head.

Margaret observed her attentively as she stood, with her long slender hand upon the back of the chair, and her eyes downcast.

Though her face was stained with weeping, and her eyelids swollen and reddened, she recognised instantly the rare and noble beauty of Louise; the purity of her skin, the abundance of her raven hair, above all, the cameo-like perfection of her classically severe features, of her small head, delicate ears, and exquisitely formed throat and bust.

"Will you tell me what is the matter?" said Margaret, gently. "I am afraid you are in great trouble."

"I am in great trouble," Louise murmured; and her lips trembled, less from self-pity than because, though Margaret was so like her mother, yet an inflection in her voice, sympathetically lowered, struck a note of resemblance to Sir Harry's in his tenderest moods. "But it is not you whom I can ask for help or for sympathy."

"Why not?"

Margaret drew a step closer.

Her eyes were blue; not the blue of steel and fire

that Louise had learned to love, but seraphically blue; soft of hue as of expression.

Now that Louise looked at her again, she saw that there was more colour in her eyes, and her face, and her hair, than her mother's portrait showed. There was also an expression which betrayed a less calm and colourless disposition.

Perhaps Margaret had inherited from her father a warmer nature, with that ruddier tint of her golden hair, and deeper rose of cheek and lip.

"Because I have wronged you."

Margaret stood gravely, as though awaiting her explanation.

"This is—the letter that your father wrote you, —asking you to come," said Louise, and she stretched out her hand with the scorched papers—"that I threw into the fire. I do not know if any of it is decipherable still—I meant to destroy it."

"Why did you want to destroy it?" Margaret asked, and she took the little packet, and held it.

Her grave blue eyes were fixed on the beautiful agitated face of poor Louise, and she saw her flush from brow to chin.

"I overheard—an insult—not intended for my ears," she said, hurriedly, "and I flung the letter Sir Harry had written into the fire in anger. I meant to tell Sir Harry, but when the time came—it seemed unnecessary, and I was afraid of his displeasure—of disappointing him——" She hid her face in her hands. "Now that I say the words—it sounds dreadful."

"I don't understand," said Margaret slowly, "why my father gave the letter to you, unless—"

unless it was you who had asked him to write it. Did you?"

"It was Dr. Morgan who suggested it, who wished me to do it," said Louise hastily. "I should never have dared, but that he pressed me."

"I knew some very strong influence must have been brought to bear upon my father, to induce him to write to me," said Margaret musingly. "So it was *you* who persuaded him—and poor old Griffiths suspected you of trying to keep me away!"

"He was justified," said Louise, almost inaudibly. "I did wish, for a moment, to keep you away."

"In consequence of something somebody said," put in Margaret quietly.

"I tried—weakly—to undo what I had done, without confessing it to Sir Harry, or running the risk of angering him, but I failed," said Louise, miserably. "I tried to salve my conscience, as I see now, by writing to you. The letter is in my pocket at this moment. I was waiting to ask Dr. Morgan for your address in the Argentine."

"May I have that letter too?"

The envelope was unclosed. Louise took the letter from it, and handed it to her, and Margaret read it attentively.

On her arm she carried a little blue morocco bag, hung by a silver chain. Louise noticed that all her appointments, and her blue travelling-dress and the plumed hat which rested on her bright hair, were dainty and exquisite in the extreme.

She took off the little bag, and opened it, and placed the burnt packet and the letter together inside.

"I should like to keep these," she said. "They will remind me, if I were ever tempted to forget, what I owe you."

"What you owe me?" said Louise bitterly.

"The fact that after ten years, my father wrote to me, and gave me leave to come," said Margaret, calmly. She seemed to hesitate and then said, "Do you know why I was so sorry for you just now; why I am so sorry still?"

Louise shook her head.

"You were crying your heart out," said Margaret, in her slow and gentle tones, "in the very place where I cried my heart out—ten years ago. There was no one to comfort me, then. Of course they have told you of my runaway marriage? When I heard what had happened—I left my husband, and I came back. I came here. I tried to see my father and he would not see me. I humbled myself and sent him messages that I thought would have moved him—or anyone. But he would not see me. So I came here, and knelt here, and sobbed my grief out to the cold stones, as you were doing. Then I went through that door by which I came in just now"—she pointed to the archway which led to the shrubbery—"and stole away, and I have never been here since. My mother was lying dead upstairs then. I have just visited her tomb out there. . . . I came in a moment ago very softly, and heard the sound of crying, and as soon as I saw you I guessed who it was. And as soon as I had spoken to you, I knew that you too loved my father, and had angered him."

"I love him with all my heart and soul," said Louise.

"I believe you. I am glad," said Margaret, simply, "for he has had a very sorrowful and lonely life since my mother died. I feared he had grown hard and bitter. I have been very unhappy about him. I should be comforted—in my far-off home—to know he was loved and cared for. And I heard of your devotion when he was ill, through Dr. Morgan. I am grieved that this misunderstanding should have arisen through your effort to do me a service."

"No, no, out of my weak and despicable repentance of my own action," said Louise vehemently.

Margaret smiled slightly, and shook her head.

"You forget—I know Aunt Belle," she murmured. "I won't ask you what she said."

Louise stood confused before the soft yet shrewd gaze of those seraphic eyes.

Margaret lifted a little blue enamel, diamond-wreathed watch, which hung from her *châtelaine*.

"It is getting late. I must go to my father. Will you stay here, and let me see you again?"

"As you wish. You have been very good to me," said Louise, humbly. She put her hand to her aching brow.

"I—I have n't had time to think what to do. He won't let me explain. He won't listen. Of course I must go home." Sir Harry's curt and bitter tone sounded again in her ears, *You have said*. "I think—I suppose—our engagement is broken off," she said with a bewildered look. "It seems impossible, all in a moment like that. But if it is—or not—I could not stay, while he feels thus, could I?" She looked appealingly at Margaret.

Margaret considered.

"You would be in a false position," she said, "and yet——"

"Perhaps—I could send him a message," faltered Louise, "that I am going home."

"If you will give me leave, I will tell him what you have told me. He may listen to my explanation though he will not to yours. You have pleaded my cause to him, now I shall be pleading for you. It seems a strangely sudden reversal of our positions, does n't it? But I must n't forget—" she uttered a little sad laugh— "that my welcome is scarcely assured yet. Still—if he wrote to ask me to come?" She looked wistfully at Louise in her turn.

Perhaps it was as well that Margaret had not received the letter after all. Louise hoped she might never know how unwillingly it was written, nor of her father's bitterly spoken wish that it might never reach its destination.

A warm sympathy for Margaret suddenly swept over her, in the midst of her own trouble.

"Go to him in the library. He will be there fretting his heart out in the twilight. It is the hour we always spend together," she said with a sob. "If you can say anything that will bring him to me, here, I know you will say it. But if he does not come—I must go home."

"I will bring him to you, if I can," said Margaret, gravely.

The light in the chapel was growing very dim.

Suddenly Louise felt two soft arms about her, and cool lips pressed to her forehead with a tenderness almost motherly.

"These few moments have made us understand each other," said Margaret. "We can never be strangers again. You signed your letter to me only Louise, and you called me Margaret just now. We both love my father. We both know that the bitterness of his anger is hard to bear. We are friends, are we not?"

Louise had never felt so drawn towards any woman. She returned Margaret's kiss with almost passionate gratitude.

"With all my heart I thank you and bless you for your generosity."

Margaret hushed her with that inflection of authoritative tenderness in her voice that recalled Sir Harry's tone so poignantly to Louise. Then she said: "I will do what you say, I will go to the library. Wish me luck." She bestowed another tremulous kiss, and went almost noiselessly from the chapel into the hall.

Louise heard a chorus of exclamation before the clanging of the iron-barred door shut out all sounds. Huddled together in her chair, she sat waiting; counting the moments by the beats of her heart; straining for every sound; nervous, yet hopeful that presently that well-known hasty footstep might echo upon the stone pavement, that Sir Harry's gigantic form might loom through the dusk, and her tired head find its resting-place upon his broad shoulder.

But the moments seemed long.

Margaret put up an entreating hand—smiled a brief greeting at the astonished group around the

tea-table—and with light swift step passed down the long hall and into the library.

Contrary to the supposition of Louise, the room was lighted and the curtains were closed.

A green shaded lamp stood on the writing-table, and beside it Sir Harry's grey head was bent over his desk, while he scribbled as fast as he could, the quill pen held by his big tremulous fingers making a great spluttering and scratching. He sprang to his feet, crumpling a quantity of blotted sheets together, as Margaret entered, and turned a flushed angry face upon her.

At the sight of that familiar face, that whitened hair, her self-control almost failed her; the tears rushed to her eyes; she stood still and looked at her father.

Though Sir Harry was instantly conscious who it was—who it must be—Margaret's resemblance to her mother was so startling, so exact, as she stood there before him in her mature and composed womanhood, whom he had seen last as an unformed girl—that his brain reeled; and almost unconsciously he cried out his wife's name.

"Alice!"

"No, no, it is I—Margaret," she sobbed. "I did not mean to startle you, Father."

It is one thing to speak bitterly and harshly of an undutiful child whom you have not seen for years, who has done you a mortal injury, who has become as a stranger to you, with whom you have persuaded yourself that you do well to be angry—and another to repulse that child when she stands before you in the flesh—tearful, imploring, repentant—the living image of a mother adored; looking

at you with eyes that recall now one, and now another of the beloved dead of your own kith and kin.

Nature cried out in Sir Harry's heart, and with a smothered sound between an oath and a sob—he took his daughter into his arms.

CHAPTER XVI

"FATHER, I must leave you."

"Why?"

"I am going back to town by the eight o'clock train."

"Not now."

"If I do not, I shall lose my ship, and I can't do that."

"Cable," he said, shortly.

"No." She looked at him with blue fearless invincibly gentle eyes. "I will not disappoint my husband and my little boys. I gave him this date as the latest I would choose for starting. I put off until then in case you might—" she put her lips to his forehead and whispered—"repent, even at the last moment—the letter you wrote in answer to mine; and send for me after all. It was only at the eleventh hour that it occurred to me to put that paragraph in the *Morning Post*. By returning to town to-night I can catch the steamer. I thank God that I have seen you again, Father, but I must go."

In the soft voice Sir Harry recognised a determination that he felt with grim amusement, to be akin to his own.

"If you must go, you must go," he said.

He thrust his hand through his grey hair with a gesture of impatient sadness.

"I will ring for them to bring you something to eat."

"No, no, I will dine on the train," she said. "I don't want to waste the few moments I have with you. Father, I have seen Louise."

He started.

"I found her sobbing in the chapel, as despairingly as I sobbed there myself,—one dreadful day—ten years ago—because you would not listen—nor forgive. I guessed who she was, and I spoke to her, and—I don't know how it was that we suddenly opened our hearts to one another; but we did, by the same strange chance, I suppose, that brought about our meeting there. I understand perfectly how and why she burnt your letter to me."

"Indeed," growled Sir Harry ironically.

"I will quote her words. She overheard an insult not intended for her ears, and flung the letter into the fire in a rage."

"That won't do, dear," said Sir Harry, with a short laugh. "You don't know the lady. She could not get into a rage if she tried."

"Then how stinging must the insult have been that could betray her into an action so inconsistent with her character," said Margaret, quickly.

His tone changed.

"Who uttered it?"

Margaret was silent for a moment.

"She would not say."

"The excuse is not a convincing one," said Sir Harry bitterly. "With a little more time, perhaps a story more complete in detail will be presented to me."

She sighed.

"In any case, what did I care for the deed—it was the concealment," he said, with a fierceness that could not hide his pain. "I will give no one the chance to deceive me twice, dear, if I can help it."

She drew a little away from him, as though his words hurt her; then thought again of Louise.

"Father, think how painful her position is; and at least hear what she has to say. She can't stay here while you feel like this towards her."

"No, dear, I did not for a moment suppose that she could," said Sir Harry, coldly.

"Father, she loves you very dearly. If she has done wrong in a moment of foolishness—the moment of weakness that may come to any of us—she is bitterly sorry for it. I wish you would go into the chapel and forgive her. Don't leave her to eat her heart out, as you left me, when I was little more than an unhappy child," said Margaret, with a sudden fire in her blue eyes and passion in her voice which took him by surprise.

"It is only in your face that you are like your mother," he muttered. "She would never have spoken like that."

"The trouble was that it was you I was like—you, and never my mother at all," she said, half laughing and half weeping. "Oh Father, you never knew me, nor cared to know me, one little bit. You never knew nor cared to know how your little girl worshipped you, how she watched and waited sometimes for a smile or a look from you; nor how jealous she was because you never had a thought nor a word nor a glance to bestow on her when ——"

She left her sentence unfinished, but Sir Harry knew what she would have said.

"Weren't you happy?" he asked, with a kind of dull wonder. The thought had never occurred to him. Margaret had been left entirely to her mother. She had a trustworthy elderly maid, and a trustworthy elderly governess, and her own apartments in the town and the country house. Her mother saw her when she thought proper, and at stated hours and on regular occasions the little girl saw her father.

Lady Gwyn's household was excellently managed; so excellently that the solitary child therein never betrayed by word nor sign the oppression of her lonely little soul.

"I was n't happy," she said, with a sob in her throat. "It is n't an excuse, and yet it is. I was lonely—starving for someone to love and understand me, someone I need not fear—I—I have learnt to be afraid of no one in all these years, and yet—yet the old childish feeling of fear is creeping over me again now—when I look round this familiar room, and at your dear face, Father."

"Were you afraid of me?" he said, in pained and puzzled tones. "I never showed you anything but kindness, Margaret. I know I am hasty at times, and I bitterly regret it; but I never was anything but gentle to you — until—— It never occurred to me that you were afraid of me."

"Not of you—not of you," Margaret cried, and she threw herself weeping upon her knees beside her father, and put both arms about him, holding him closely. "Never of you, my darling. Oh

Father, Father, don't you see that I can't say the words now."

Then Sir Harry understood. It was as though a new light were thrown across the dim landscape of the past, revealing familiar features half forgotten or never wholly observed.

He had truly told Louise that he had had little in common with his child; that she had been nothing to him; his care, his attention, his affection, had all been heaped upon the mother, whom he had loved with the concentrated fervour of his nature.

Perhaps the tenderness, the sympathy, and the subtle understanding manifested by Louise had opened Sir Harry's eyes, unwillingly, to some of the deficiencies of his wife's character; deficiencies to which he had been blind during her lifetime; so that he understood that bitter cry of appeal from Margaret now, as he would have been quite incapable of understanding it six months earlier.

He knew that Lady Gwyn was devoted to her child, that she had planned incessantly for her future, that she dwelt with delight upon her beauty and healthfulness, and guarded her jealously from intercourse with less well-trained children, lest her perfection should be marred.

Yet in spite of this care and wisdom lavished upon her, the girl had grown up unaccountably wayward, sullen, and unresponsive to her mother's dignified and authoritative kindness.

Sir Harry's wife had ruled him absolutely, by virtue of the gentle evasive persistency that baffles the strongest will; and by the influence which a placid, selfish woman, unruffled by strong emotions, sometimes obtains over a warm and generous

and restless nature. So tactful was her rule, however, so subtly she withheld or granted her favour according to his submission, so feminine was her dependence upon him in matters which did not directly concern her own wishes—that he had never suspected it; nor dreamt that every servant in the household knew that his wife could twist him round her little finger.

Her rule over her household he saw and admired; for indeed that calm strength united with so gracious and winning a manner was admirable.

Had her rule over her child, too, been that of the iron hand in the velvet glove?

Margaret's mother had not been a demonstrative woman. Had she not been a loving woman, either?

He recalled Dr. Morgan's passionate pleading for Margaret at the time of the tragedy; but he could not recall any word that had been uttered, save by his own lips, of the mother's broken heart. He could not recall that any overwhelming grief had been manifested for her—the sympathy had been for himself—for Margaret, not for the mother's sorrow. Was it sorrow or only the shock to her pride—the suddenness? He hid his face in his hands. He could not bear to have doubts cast upon that sacred memory—and yet as he looked at the past, illumined by that new light held up by his daughter's hand—the doubts were there—lowering like dark clouds over the view of her childhood.

She kissed him silently, and though he tried to harden his heart against her, he could not. He sat down, and drew her on to his knee, so that she felt almost like a child again, as she put her arms about his neck, and rested her cheek on his. She

recalled her old childish pride in his great stature, his soldierly uprightness, his strength and his good looks.

"You used to hold me like that now and then, when I was little, Father, but never as I grew older. Why?"

"She was afraid of spoiling you," he muttered hoarsely, then hastily corrected himself, taking the responsibility on to his own shoulders though the fear had been none of his, as she knew, and as he knew now that she knew. "*I was afraid of spoiling you. An only child is easily spoilt. Margaret, Margaret, she may have been strict; but you mustn't think you weren't very dear to your mother.*"

It seemed incredible that he should be uttering excuses—for Alice.

"I wish you had spoilt me. I should have had that to look back upon," she murmured, "but you have kissed me now, and my heart will be light again as it has never been in all these years."

"Don't be afraid of me any more, dear," he said.

"I will not. But, Father, don't be unforgiving any more. It is n't worth it. Life is too short, and those we love too few," she whispered. "Let me leave you happy, too, before I go. I have only a few minutes more."

He rose, and put her from him, but not ungently.

"My dear, I don't give my trust again lightly when it has once been shaken. You must leave me to manage my own affairs."

She sighed.

His tone implied that he would brook no further interference from her.

"Will you order the carriage for me?" she said. "I walked up from the station and I am tired. And could I see poor Griffiths before I go?"

"Griffiths will be going up by the same train."

"You have sent him away?"

"I don't keep anyone about me who tampers with letters," he said, briefly.

She sighed again.

"Poor Griffiths, and that again was through me. You will miss him."

"Nonsense."

"Would you mind if I asked him to come to us? He would be invaluable out there."

"Ask him by all means. He'll only be too glad," said Sir Harry gruffly. She fancied his tone sounded a little relieved.

He rang the bell; then said suddenly.

"I'll come with you to Southampton."

"Father!" she cried, touched and pleased; then remembering Louise, she faltered.

"No, no, you must n't. It is a long tiring journey—you've been ill."

"Nonsense—I'm as well as ever—there's no reason why I should n't come."

A servant answered the bell.

"Tell Griffiths—" he corrected himself hastily—"tell somebody to pack my portmanteau instantly. I may be away some days. The station brougham is to be round in time for the eight o'clock train, and the dog-cart for Griffiths and the luggage."

The servant withdrew.

Margaret stood hesitating—irresolute.

"Have you seen your aunt and cousins?" Sir Harry asked abruptly.

"I saw them, but I did not speak. I came straight to you—from the chapel," she said, looking anxiously at him. "I must return there before I go. She is waiting."

He made no sign of having heard the last words.

"I should think you must have startled them all out of their senses," he said, grimly, "as you did me."

She waited while he swept up the scattered sheets of paper on his desk, and locked them into a drawer. She could not help wondering sadly whether he had been writing to Louise.

He held out a hand to her, and so led her among the surprised and waiting group in the hall.

CHAPTER XVII

"It is growing so dark. I can scarcely see. Are you there, Louise?"

"Yes, I am here."

"Oh, how cold your hands are. This place is chilly and damp. I ought not to have let you stay here. Louise, I have failed—failed as regards you, though I have won for myself; but I have not brought him. I have not been able to bring him."

"Did you tell him?"

"I told him."

"He does not believe?" said Louise, despairingly. "He is still angry? Then it's all over, of course."

"I think he is not so much angry as bitter and hurt, and—and——"

"Disappointed?"

"You know the depths of his feelings."

Louise felt that no one knew better. She smiled sadly in the darkness.

"I believe that if he loved you less—he would feel it less," Margaret said. "Louise, he suddenly suggested going with me to Southampton. I didn't know what to say. I want him to come, but I don't like his leaving you like that. Yet I dared not oppose him, for you know how sensitive he is."

"You were quite right not to oppose him. I am very glad he should go. It is only natural," said

Louise, in a trembling voice, "and it will make it easier for me, in a sense, to slip quietly away—home. Of course I must go home."

"Yes," Margaret said, softly. "I see that; and I think in a way, too, that it may be better for him, when he comes back, to find you gone. He will be alone then and have time to reflect quietly, and that may bring him to his senses."

"It did n't before," said Louise, almost involuntarily; the despair in her voice was tragic.

"But this time his own happiness is in question as well as yours," said Margaret, with a momentary bitterness she could not help.

The hot tears raining upon her hand in the darkness roused afresh her generous indignation and pity.

"Don't despair, Louise. Go to Dr. Morgan—he is your friend, is n't he?"

"The kindest in the world."

"Tell him everything. I wish I could have stayed and taken counsel with him, but I must n't disappoint my husband. He was so good about my coming. Perhaps when I am gone, my words will come back to my father and soften him. Don't cry any more. Don't sit here in the cold."

"I will go home as soon as you are gone."

"Be comforted," said Margaret. "My last word to my father shall be of you. He will come back to you; he must. And no one here will ever know anything of this, but what you choose to tell them. I am taking Griffiths with me. Do not lose hope. You will write to me, and I to you."

Margaret was gone.

Louise had now only one thought—to creep away—back to her cottage, as quickly as she could.

She called the little pride in her nature to her aid, and steadied and calmed herself before opening the door of the chapel.

At first she thought fate was unkind, in permitting Lady Cadoc and Gwenllian and young Harry to be still gathered together in the hall; where Lady Cadoc was discussing in animated tones the amazing circumstance of Margaret's sudden descent upon the Castle; but afterwards Louise was glad that she had the opportunity of seeing them and of speaking to them before she left.

The illumination afforded by the shaded candelabra on the walls, was of the dimmest, and firelight is kind; she hoped her swollen eyes and reddened eyelids were not too noticeable.

"There you are!" cried Lady Cadoc's shrill voice, in astonishment. "I could not imagine where you had hidden yourself. We thought you had gone out. Have you heard the news? But of course you have, since Margaret said she had made your acquaintance on her way here. And now she is off again! My brother said I was to make his apologies to you for his abrupt departure, but that you would understand. So I suppose he could not find you to tell you he was going to Southampton. I only hope they have caught their train! But it was all settled in such a bustle there was no time for anything. However it seems we are to be left to take care of ourselves for a day or two." She observed the flushed face of Louise and considerably averted her gaze.

"I suppose we must dine all the same," she said

with a laugh. "Come, Gwenllian, it is long past dressing-time."

"Come up-stairs," said Gwenllian, putting her arm through the arm of Louise affectionately.

"I will come up-stairs, but not to dress," said Louise. "I must put my things together. I am called suddenly home. Perhaps I had better say good-bye to you all now."

No presence of mind could altogether conceal the surprise depicted in the three faces before her.

"Can't she exist here a day without him," thought Lady Cadoc, resentfully; though but a moment ago she had been asking her child what on earth they would do with Mrs. Owen while Sir Harry was away.

"I hope your sister-in-law is not ill," she said, stiffly.

"No, she is not ill, but I am obliged quite unexpectedly, to return to her at once," Louise stammered, nervously. "I was going to ask you, if you would be so kind as to order my things to be taken over to my cottage this evening—if it is not giving too much trouble." Her tone was so entreating that Lady Cadoc relented; she was, besides, flattered by the appeal to her authority.

"Trouble, with a stable full of idle horses, and men doing nothing. Nonsense. Of course everything and everybody here are at your service. But why not wait till after dinner?"

"I would rather walk, before it gets quite dark. I like the walk," said Louise.

She tried to laugh.

"May I escort you?" said young Harry.

"Oh, no, no. Thank you very much." She shook

her head gently but so decidedly that he said no more.

"Well, you must do as you like," said Lady Cadoc, in wondering uncertain tones.

"Thank you very much," repeated Louise.

Then she shook hands with them all, and went slowly up the grand staircase.

"What does it all mean?" young Harry said aside to Gwenllian. His face was red, and wrath lowered upon his brow.

"They must have quarrelled," she answered, below her breath. "It's *his* fault," she added defiantly.

"Of course it's his fault," said Harry, between his teeth. "Is *she* quarrelsome?"

"She is an angel," murmured Gwenllian.

"Her hand was like ice," said young Harry, frowning, and pulling his flaxen moustache with a fierce gesture imitative of Sir Harry's own.

"She has been in the chapel which is like an ice-house; that's why Margaret went in there. Something has happened."

"That's very obvious," said Harry, gloomily.

"I wish you would n't always be talking in that undertone to each other. You have no idea how it gets on my nerves," said Lady Cadoc, fretfully. "I am already sufficiently upset by seeing Margaret so suddenly. It's extraordinary how people can change in ten years. She used to be a slip of a girl, as slim as a wand, and now she is a regular matron. It was exactly like poor Alice walking into the room. Beautiful colouring, and very sweet and dignified, but quite twenty-seven inches round the waist, which at her age is absurd. She's

still under thirty. She has let herself go to pieces. That comes of these runaway matches and living abroad. *I* never let my waist go for a moment until I was turned fifty."

"Oh Mamma, what a relief that must have been," said Gwenllian, surveying her mother's ample proportions with twinkling eyes. "*I* thought Margaret looked like a picture, and I should like to see her little boys."

"Four of them; ridiculous," said Lady Cadoc, severely. "Well, of course I'm very thankful it should be made up. So like your poor uncle to be adamant for ten years, and then go to the other extreme and be melted all in a moment. And why they should dash off together like that without giving one time to ask a single question, I cannot for the life of me understand. However I suppose he will make it up with your Aunt Sophy now, and we shall all be friends together."

But all the time she was dressing, Lady Cadoc's mind was busily endeavouring to piece together the circumstances of Margaret's arrival, and the sudden departure of Louise. That these events had some connection she could not doubt; and a faint hope presently began to dawn upon her, that a rupture of the engagement between her brother and Mrs. Owen might be the outcome of it all.

Louise put together her few possessions, and locked and strapped the little old leather trunk and bag.

She was too much accustomed to wait upon herself, to leave the least thing undone; and she worked so rapidly that in twenty minutes all was ready.

Then she put on her things, and went quietly down the great staircase through the banqueting chamber and the vaulted entrance hall, and with some difficulty opened the heavy front door and let herself out.

The September evening was quite light still outside, and she knew the road well now.

The air refreshed her burning eyes, and the mere exertion of walking fast brought back a certain feeling of courage and hope.

The catastrophe was so recent that it was impossible to realise it could be final. She would take Margaret's advice and consult her true kind friend, her earliest champion, and confess to him her trouble and its cause.

She knew he would wait at home for her to-morrow morning as she had asked him.

Her heart smote her suddenly as she reflected how small a share of her thoughts had recently been bestowed upon him. Had she grown selfish in her great happiness—the happiness she had found so late, and in which she had been so utterly absorbed during these past weeks?

Oh, it was not possible it could have escaped her hold thus in a moment—a single moment of folly and weakness.

It must be put right. It must—it must. She could not stay at the Castle and force her explanation upon Sir Harry; she recognised that she had done the only possible thing in coming away; but she could write to him, it would be easier to write; and put her case as simply and frankly as she could, and ask his forgiveness.

It would be for him to grant or withhold it; and

for him to suggest the renewal of that engagement which his own words had so abruptly ended.

She lost herself in dreams of that reconciliation scene.

He would forgive her when he had read the letter she would write, and when he had had time to reflect. Though he was hasty and passionate, he was also generous and warm-hearted and quick of understanding. He would see how it was. He would forgive her.

Yet her heart sank whenever she remembered the long long estrangement between Sir Harry and his only child.

She toiled up the steep lane which led to her little habitation, and opened the yard-door, and climbed the flights of stone steps to the level of the terrace before the porch.

There was a cheerful glow from the open window of the kitchen, but that of the parlour was carefully curtained.

Not wishing to startle Anna, Louise knocked with her knuckles at the door beneath the shelter of the porch; at first gently, then receiving no answer, more loudly; and she heard Anna's voice calling indignantly to Mrs. Jones to answer the door.

Reflecting that between Mrs. Jones's deafness and Anna's gentility, she might be kept waiting for some time, Louise made no further ado, but opened the door for herself and walked in.

"Goodness gracious me!" said Anna, pausing astonished in the doorway of the parlour. "What made you knock at your own door?"

"I was afraid of startling you."

"It takes more than that to startle me," said

Anna, with some contempt. "Well, it's an odd hour for you to call, but I'm sure you're welcome. I was going to write to you this evening. This will save me the trouble. I've lots to tell you. How did you get away? What makes you come so late?"

"Anna, I'll explain presently. Perhaps to-morrow. I determined to come home rather suddenly," said Louise.

"I suppose you've had a turn-up with your old man?"

Louise was annoyed by the expression; but she decided to admit the fact.

"Yes, I have. If you choose to put it in that way."

"What way should I put it? I like things put as plainly as possible; but that is a point upon which you and I would never agree," said Anna, almost good-humouredly. "You must go twisting and turning things to make them sound as pleasant as possible, till one does n't know what's white and what's black; and I tell the plain truth. There you are!"

Alas! was it not the plain truth that Anna was speaking now? Her words added another pang to the wounded heart of Louise.

"Yet—if I told you a thing—you would believe it, Anna. You would not doubt my word?" she faltered.

Anna turned her shrewd grey eyes upon her.

"Do you mean your old man has found out your weakness?"

"My weakness?"

"Well, your softness—if you like it better," said Anna, impatiently. "Your want of backbone.

Your being unable to say anything plump out for fear somebody should n't like it. If you don't call that weakness, I do."

"Yes, I suppose that is what he has found out," said Louise, blankly.

Anna suddenly perceived in the light of the single lamp upon the table, that Louise had been weeping recently.

"I should n't take it to heart if he had," she observed, in softened tones. "Men aren't worth it. They're ungrateful brutes, every one of them. Come! Here's supper, you'll feel better when you've eaten something."

Louise greeted Mrs. Jones with a silent smile; and watched the arrangement of the frugal meal absently.

"Come and sit down," said Anna, as soon as the door had closed, "I dare say it seems odd to you that I should invite you to sit down to your own table; but after all, in a way, it's my feast. Since you make such a fuss about my paying my way I've kept your housekeeping expenses as low as I can. If one has all the boredom of living in the country one may as well make the most of the economy. Here are broiled mushrooms on toast. They cost nothing, I gathered them in the fields. Dr. Morgan's gardener showed me which were mushrooms and which were n't, though Mrs. Jones laughed at the notion of her cooking a toadstool by accident. I got these apples out of the garden, and the blackberries off the hedges. I'm fond of stewed fruit, and I find the Morgan's supply you with milk and cream from their dairy for nothing. I must say they are good neighbours in their own tiresome

way. Talking of the gardener, he's not so civil to me now as he was when first I came. I saw he was a time-server by the way he kept asking after you, I suppose he hoped you'd get him taken on at the Castle. Well, I'm not sorry to see you, Louise."

This was the nearest approach Anna ever made to admitting that she was glad, and Louise at another time would have responded gratefully.

But she was too much dejected to-night to have much attention to bestow on Anna's conversation. She trifled absently with her supper, thinking of the wording of her proposed letter, and imagining what Sir Harry's reception of it would be.

Presently a commotion outside, the barking of Mrs. Jones's mongrel, and a stamping and knocking in the porch, announced the arrival of her luggage. Louise started up, and went outside to thank the servant who brought it, giving him half a crown from her slender purse. In the little hall, even her modest trunk looked large. He touched his hat, and thanked her and bade her good-night civilly and went away.

Louise called Mrs. Jones, and between them they carried the trunk up the narrow staircase, though the action scandalised Anna.

"If you must tip that idle flunkey—I saw you tip him—why not have made him carry the luggage up-stairs first?" she said indignantly, "or the gardener would have carried it up for nothing the first thing in the morning. I never heard of ladies carrying their own luggage, however small their means might be, but it appears to me, Louise, that you have no sense whatever of what is due to one's position in life."

At last she was alone in the white attic, with the door locked, and the curtains drawn, and no human eye to behold her as she sat by the dressing-table before the shabby old desk of her childhood. There, by the light of a single candle, that difficult letter was written which was to explain her action to Sir Harry Gwyn.

Many many pages were blotted and crossed out, and re-written, before she could be even partially satisfied. When she had finished, it was less an explanation than a frank and humble confession of her own weakness.

She began by recounting clearly her first unwillingness to risk displeasing him by opening a subject he had never invited her to mention; her yielding to the doctor's persuasion; her joy in the success of her mission; the anger and mortification caused her by Lady Cadoc's words, which she now felt that justice to herself and him demanded should be transcribed; and her burning the letter in a moment of ungovernable resentment, yet without a thought at the time of concealing her action from him.

To write all this at length was easy; to measure it by Sir Harry's impatience, and condense it accordingly—not so easy. And yet more difficult to explain was the changed aspect in which her deed appeared to her, in the calm of after reflection, and in the light of his subsequent praise of her and of her motives.

“But Harry,” she wrote very simply, “it was because I could not bear to disappoint you, that I did not tell you, and not because I wanted to keep you

from Margaret. Be just to me. When I would have spoken you stopped me—if you will pause to think you will remember this, and that I did beg you to telegraph to her, and was silenced because your wish not to see her was so decidedly expressed. And I think before you get this, that she will have shown you the letter I wrote her by your permission, though there is alas, nothing but my word to prove that I ever meant to post that letter either. I am not trying to excuse myself. Excuses may be made for my burning the letter, but none, I know, for my letting you suppose that I had sent it. I was too weak to be honest. I failed in the truth I owed you not because I desired to deceive you, but because I feared to pain you by showing myself less worthy of your love than you thought me. This is my fault, and I ask you with all my heart and on my knees to forgive me. To send me one word to say you will forgive me. More I cannot and dare not ask. My love for you will never change, even if by my own fatal weakness—by this single failure—I have destroyed all yours for me. But I cannot bring myself to believe that I have, not until you write—calmly—and after your first natural anger with me has passed away, to tell me so. May God bless you, and soften your heart towards your unhappy

LOUISE.”

CHAPTER XVIII

LOUISE, worn out with emotion and tears, fell into a heavy sleep as the dawn of a new day broke over the hills.

When at length she woke, and drew back her curtains, she found the September sun shining brilliantly upon her gay little garden.

Below her window a bush of sweet lavender had dropped showers of perfumed seeds. She looked down into a plum tree dangling purple fruit within reach of her hand.

Her spirits rose—her hopes brightened.

She read over her letter once more, and resolved to send it to the Castle to await Sir Harry's return, which would probably be on the morrow. She closed, sealed, and kissed it, and wrote on the envelope *Not to be forwarded*. He should find it waiting for his arrival.

Breakfast was not less frugal than the supper of the previous night. Anna was conscientiously starving herself to save the purse of her hostess, and possibly her own.

There was a dish of ripe figs. "You could have knocked me down with a feather when I found them on the wall," said Anna. "I thought they came from Italy or hot-houses."

There were also stewed peaches (windfalls, Anna was careful to explain), and a generous slab of yel-

low butter from Mrs. Morgan's dairy. The only expense that Anna had incurred was the price of a small loaf of bread.

"I did n't grudge that. One must have bread," she remarked.

Louise thought of the groaning sideboard at the Castle, the game-pies, the glazed meats, and the row of smoking dishes over a copper furnace, and laughed her low amused laugh.

"You look better this morning. I mean less like a washed-out rag than you did last night," said Anna, hastening to qualify her eulogy.

"I feel better. It is such a beautiful morning. Sunshine always affects my spirits."

"That is just your fancy," said Anna. "However I suppose you've a right to fancy what you like. What are you going to do to-day? Mrs. Jones says those plums ought to be made into jam. I told her I could n't give her authority to buy sugar. She says she can get it in the village."

"By all means," said Louise, and she handed her purse across the table. "Won't you see about it, Anna, I should be so grateful, and I have to go and see Dr. Morgan this morning. He is expecting me."

"I am only too thankful to have something to do, I'm sure," said Anna. "Can I do anything else while I'm down there? It seems a pity to have to climb that old hill twice."

Louise thought of her letter and blushed. No, she would not trust that precious missive to any hands but her own.

"I shall be going down myself later," she said. "But I dare say Mrs. Jones would be glad to have the sugar at once."

She curbed her inclination to start earlier for the doctor's house than the previously appointed hour; and then took her way across the kitchen-garden and the rough orchard behind the cottage to Brach-y-Gwynt.

The air was fresh though the sun was hot; a robin, perched on the wood-heap, stretched upwards his red and swelling throat and sang so merrily that she could not help pausing to listen; little white butterflies hovered over the cabbage patch which had given them birth.

To the old gnarled trees of the hill-side orchard, clung branches of mistletoe, with berries yet green, beneath the reddening apples; the September gorse was in straggling blossom; the bees hummed in the wild thyme among the dry bracken.

The valley was bathed in a mist of glory that enveloped alike distant hill and emerald meadow sloping to the river-side; there the sleepy cattle stood beside the weir, far far below her.

The magic of the sunshine transformed all the green world to gold.

Her path was strewn here and there with the little ripe damsons, dropping off the trees; and her eyes were pleased with the bright colour of a humble family of common red poppies springing by the wayside.

She passed through the shrubbery which sheltered the back of the doctor's house, and stepped out on to the drive.

Round the sides, and along the front of the house ran a white verandah, supported by slender iron pillars wreathed with climbing roses and clematis.

Brilliant nasturtiums glowed in great earthen vases placed at intervals between the openings.

The doctor was pacing slowly up and down the tessellated pavement of the verandah, smoking his morning cigarette. But he threw it away when he saw Louise, and came forward eagerly to meet her. She perceived that he had been waiting for her.

As his kind hazel eyes scanned her face, his expression changed; she shook her head and only answered his anxious inquiry with a faint smile.

"Come into my study. We shall be alone there," said the doctor, and he led the way round the house to the farther side, through an open French window. "I said you wanted to talk to me on business, so we shall not be interrupted. Now then, my dear, speak what is in your mind." His voice was infinitely tender.

He placed her in the easy chair beside his writing table, and himself took his usual place before his desk.

"You see I am treating you as a patient. You shall sit there, and consult your old physician."

Thus he talked, giving her time to master the sudden emotion which had threatened to overcome her at the first sight of his sympathising face.

Louise sat clasping the letter she had written to Sir Harry, with the light from the creeper-shaded window falling upon her beautiful troubled face, to render it yet paler; while she made her confession to her old friend.

The gravity of his expression when she had finished did not tend to reassure her.

Towards the end of her recital his agitation made it impossible for him to remain calmly seated. He

rose and paced up and down the study, nor did he speak for some time after she had ceased.

Then he perceived that she was regarding him wistfully, and stopped before her, and took her hand.

"My dear, I cannot pretend that it is not a great misfortune this thing has happened."

"It is my own fault," said Louise sadly, "my own folly; but I do not know that that makes it any the easier to bear, that it is myself I must blame."

"I do not blame you," said the doctor, tenderly. "Another might, who did not know the fancifulness and sensitiveness of the impetuous man with whom you had to deal; who did not realise, as you and I do, that it is to him imperatively necessary to idealise where he loves. It is possible to some persons—to you—to me," he said, in low tones, "to love the human being, faults and all."

"Ah, even the more for all his faults," she interrupted piteously.

"But his temperament is different. It has to be reckoned with; and you reckoned with it. You dared not disappoint or chill him by avowal of a wrong action committed in a hasty moment."

"You are too kind to blame me," said Louise sadly, "that is all."

"My dear, standing where I stand, on the last steps of the ladder of life, it is hard to measure forth blame to anyone. Sympathy, sorrow, the longing to put things right, are all the feelings left to me. This must be put right."

"I have written to him." She hesitated; a beautiful colour rose in her face. "I would like to

show you what I have written, lest it be too much or too little; but I have a feeling that he would not like it; that my written words to him should be sacred."

"Do not read them to me," said the doctor quickly, "it is a feeling I share with you very strongly. If you have written as simply and convincingly as you have spoken all may yet come right. And it is something that Margaret should be on your side. Poor little Margaret, I would I had seen her. My dear, I wish I did not feel that all this unhappiness has arisen through my urgent request to you to intercede for her."

"No, no, I can only be glad that at least good for her has come out of so much evil for me," said poor Louise, "and she is my friend now, and said her last words to her father would be for me. I think his heart may be softened towards her still further when she has gone, and as he comes back alone. And then he will find my letter waiting—and then perhaps—perhaps——"

She left the sentence unfinished, but her wistful eyes completed it.

The doctor took another turn about the room. In his sympathy with Louise his indignation against Sir Harry began to rise.

"He has treated you very badly. I am ashamed of him. A guest in his house—his promised wife—the woman who saved his life—to go off and leave her without a word."

"He did not do that," said Louise, quickly and sorrowfully. "His voice rings in my ears. His answer when I cried out that how could I marry a man who would not believe my word—*You have*

said it—that hard and bitter voice—that look—which told me that my happiness was ended.”

“Do I not know how he looks when he is angry,” said the doctor. “One comfort is that he does not mean half he says at those times.”

“He did not say much to me. But oh! the words that are n’t spoken, how much more they mean,” said Louise bitterly.

“Well—it may be as well that he went. His hot head will have time to cool—if only it does not cool into obstinacy. What day does he return?”

“I suppose to-morrow; they said a day or two. No doubt he will sleep a night at Southampton after seeing Margaret off. I hope he will not knock himself up,” she said, looking alarmed.

“Pooh, I hope *you* won’t fret yourself to death,” said the doctor. “Look here, if he does not come over to the cottage as he ought—immediately on receipt of your letter—and make his apologies, I will go to Morlais, and tell him what I think of him.”

“I do not want him brought back to me against his will,” she said, colouring.

“Oh, if you are going to be proud I wash my hands of you,” said the doctor, roughly but kindly. “Wouldn’t you have helped to bring him back from death against his will; and won’t you help to rescue him from the misery and loneliness his own infernal unreasonable hot-headed obstinate——”

“Dr. Morgan! I will not let you abuse him.” Her soft eyes actually flashed.

“Ah well—” he stared and laughed, “you have n’t known him as many weeks as I have known him years—but no doubt I am taking a liberty with

your property. Forgive me." His tone changed. "My dear, if I did not love him so well I should not abuse his faults, nor regret them, as I do. Believe me, if I did not know them to be all on the surface, I should not desire this marriage. But to me it has been given—as to you—to recognise his real nobility—his generosity—his transparent sincerity—ah, you like better to hear of his virtues than of his failings!"

"It is because I recognise him better when you speak of him like that."

He was moved by the softness of her tone—the loyalty of her words.

"Do you care so much as that?" he asked in a low tone.

"Do you ask me how much I care?" said Louise passionately. "I care so much that I would—gather the thorns in his path and press them into my heart—before they should hurt him," she drew a long breath of sobbing laughter. "Anna would say I was very affected to say that. I dare say most people would think so."

"Let us hope," said the doctor, drily, "that the Annas of this world are not in the majority. I have seen a good deal of Miss Owen lately. It has sometimes occurred to me that if only she *meant* to be funny, she would be the wittiest woman I know."

"Far from wishing to be funny, she is very much in earnest," said Louise, smiling.

"Yes, I know. That makes her fatiguing instead of amusing."

"I wish my being here had not brought her down upon you," said Louise, remorsefully. "Often I

reproach myself—I have been no use, no help, no comfort to you.”

“Have you not?” He looked at her with a quiet smile, shading his eyes with his hand from the sun now streaming into the room. “Don’t you know it rests me even to look at you? Do you think I regret the battle with death we fought side by side and won, for my dear friend? or that I am not vitally interested in every question that affects his happiness—or yours?”

“I know you are the kindest and most unselfish friend a woman ever had,” she said, with tears in her eyes. “I can’t repay you. I can only thank you and bless you.”

He kissed the hand she held out to him, very gently and reverently.

“I am going home—I have tired you long enough.”

“Won’t you stay to luncheon?”

“Anna expects me,” Louise smiled in the midst of her sadness. “She is becoming a vegetarian in her determination not to waste the produce of the garden, though it must be a terrible sacrifice to her, as she is really fond of mutton chops and rump steaks.”

“I wish you had a more sympathetic companion.”

“I often think life is like a nightmare, fastening upon you like leeches the things and the company you would not have; while all you long for most vanishes in your grasp. Yet perhaps it is good for me to be with Anna. Her remarks about sickly sentimentality have a bracing effect,” said Louise with a subdued laugh. “And she has her qualities. She is staunch in her way.”

"It is a very unpleasant way," said the doctor, energetically. "Well then—if you must go—at least come into the next room and see Mary first."

Mrs. Morgan came forward to embrace her friend with *empressement*; but neither the doctor nor Louise was prepared to find Lady Cadoc also in the drawing-room.

Louise thought both ladies were taken aback by her entrance, and from the guiltiness of their expressions she divined easily that her own affairs had formed the theme of their conversation.

"This is a delightful surprise to see you so soon, dear. I thought you would be shut up over your business in the doctor's poky little room for hours," said Mrs. Morgan in her delicately mincing accents.

"I suppose you have had a telegram from Southampton," said Lady Cadoc's franker and more natural tones. "Ours came this morning. We are still gasping. I have been telling Mrs. Morgan of my niece's surprise visit to Morlais yesterday. I knew it would interest her. I *had* to come over here, as you will remember, to arrange about the meeting of the Women's Provident Union."

Louise with an effort, remembered that the arrangement had been made; but the allusion to the telegram from Southampton swallowed up her interest in all else.

She stood motionless, waiting, with her dark eyes fixed in unconscious appeal on Lady Cadoc's large, florid, good-humoured face.

"I dare say you will find yours when you get back," said Lady Cadoc; but she looked away from Louise uneasily. "It was evidently one of his sud-

den impulses—you know how impetuous he can be—or perhaps Margaret was upset by the idea of parting from him so soon after they had made friends,” she rambled on, growing more nervous as Louise grew paler. “He has sailed to the Argentine with her.”

The doctor uttered a sharp exclamation.

“I was just reading his telegram,” Lady Cadoc fumbled for her black velvet reticule and her gold-rimmed pince-nez, “of course he will be away no time at all. Here are his words. *Sailing with Margaret for Argentina, hope to find you still at Morlais on my return.* That is all, except that he telegraphed to his agent and the housekeeper. He must mean of course that he is coming straight back again, for it was settled we were to leave Morlais at the end of October—as soon as——” She ended in confusion, for it had been settled that she was to leave Morlais immediately after her brother’s wedding.

There was an uncomfortable silence, but Lady Cadoc recovered her presence of mind almost instantly.

“Of course he must have been obliged to decide all in a moment,” she said apologetically. “My fear is that poor Margaret must have been taken suddenly ill, in which case of course he could not let her take the long journey alone. It must have been unpremeditated, and I cannot imagine a more uncomfortable thing than an unpremeditated voyage. My maid told me he only had things packed for a day or two. It is all a perfect mystery to me. But of course *your* telegram will be more explicit.”

Now the Post-office of Glascewm lay in the village just below the cottage of Louise, and barely a quarter of a mile from her door; whereas, since there was no way of crossing the river but by the bridge, it was a matter of two and a half miles from thence to the Castle of Morlais.

Louise knew very well that she would have received her telegram before leaving home, had Sir Harry thought fit to send her one.

Though she was white almost to the lips, she stood facing Lady Cadoc bravely, calling all her womanly pride and dignity and courage to her aid.

"I have had no telegram," she said, in low clear tones, "and it is not likely I shall have one. I was leaving Sir Harry to tell you, but since he has been called away so suddenly, I think I had better tell you myself, that our engagement is at an end."

There was a pause of consternation. Lady Cadoc rose suddenly and came to Louise with outstretched hands.

"Oh—my poor dear. I am so sorry," she said, in a voice full of emotion.

The doctor and Louise simultaneously recognised the curious fact that her emotion was genuine. Lady Cadoc had wished and prayed that this marriage should be broken off; would even have plotted had she known how or been clever enough or unprincipled enough to bring about this end; yet, at the moment when she learnt that her wish was fulfilled, she was possessed by regret.

She was good-natured and disliked seeing anyone suffer, and she was aware that Louise was suffering acutely; therefore she was sorry for her,

and tears born of her sudden pity filled her eyes.

Later—not very much later, perhaps almost immediately, she would be consoled by the reflection that young Harry was now once more an indisputably excellent *parti* for her daughter; but just now she pressed the cold slender hand of Louise between her own dimpled well-gloved palms, and kissed either pale cheek affectionately, and dropped a tear which made a mark upon the pale mauve chiffon of her *chemisette*.

“My poor, poor dear—I don’t know what to say—I will leave you to your old friends—to your kind good friend, Dr. Morgan; that will be the best thing. I am too much upset myself now to say anything,” said Lady Cadoc, incoherently. “Only do remember whatever happens, you have always—always—a friend in me.”

The doctor opened the door for her in silence, and escorted her to the low pony carriage which was waiting at the hall-door.

“I must say I think it very ungrateful of my brother,” said Lady Cadoc, as they went through the hall, “after all, she saved his life. I only hope this may not kill her. She looks quite dreadful, poor thing. I do beseech you to take care of her, and let me know if there is anything, anything that I can do.”

“I will let you know,” said the doctor, gently.

He remembered a former conversation with the lady, but he made no allusion to it. Since she had forgotten it, there appeared to be nothing to say. Lady Cadoc was never troubled by her own inconsistency. Though her tongue was long, her memory was short.

"Was I right?" Louise asked him, as they walked slowly down the drive together towards her cottage.

"Yes, my dear. I think under the circumstances, you were right," he said sorrowfully. "He evidently believes it to be so. Until he offers an explanation, you have no choice now but to accept the situation. Will you post your letter to the Argentine?"

"No," she said passionately. "Of what use? We don't know where he will be—where he will stop. And I will not send it to his house. He does not want it."

"Will you trust it to me? I will not send it—but I will put it into his own hand on the first opportunity."

She gave it to him in silence

"My dear, my dear, don't give up hope," he said, tenderly. "You must not."

But he knew, as she looked at him and smiled, that Louise had given up hope.

CHAPTER XIX

Now that the blow had fallen, Louise bore it more calmly than the doctor had believed possible.

She occupied herself incessantly, if mechanically, and entered into Anna's schemes for economy and jam-making with submissive interest.

"You are much more like your old self since your engagement was broken off," said Anna, approvingly, for she disliked change and welcomed the reappearance of the former Louise; the gentle silent acquiescent being who never disputed because she did not care; who was submissive because she was hopeless, who went about her business with hands that were never idle, but with dreaming eyes full of sadness.

Louise went presently every day to a humble home on the mountain-side, where a little boy lay with a broken limb. She nursed him, and tended him, and sang to him, and told him stories. He would not call her Nurse, he called her the Black Lady, and worshipped her faithfully, and told his mother he hoped as soon as he was well, to break the other leg that the Black Lady might come and nurse him a lot more; and his mother told Anna, when she came to the Hafod to get the broth Mrs. Jones had made for the sick child:

"Mrs. Owen's more like an angel than a woman—'t is what we all say, and the doctor says the

same. He's fair sweet on her, and so's my little Johnny," she said effusively to Anna.

Anna's comment to Louise was that she feared Mrs. Davies was little better than a sycophant.

Miss Owen visited the little boy, and he hid his face in the bed-clothes and cried. As he was only seven years old, she did not call him a sycophant, but said that Louise had spoilt him.

As a fact Anna did not understand the attraction which Louise appeared to possess for those who now surrounded her. She regarded with scorn and wonder these odd people who seemed to think so much of one who in her former home had almost invariably been referred to with pity, if not contempt, as *poor Louise*, or *poor Mrs. Owen*.

Her gentle ways and soft voice, the rare utterance of her playful and tender fancies, the quick emotions so easily moved, the simplicity—Poor Louise! She and her mother had looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders.

Nor did Anna make sufficient allowance for the effect produced by her sister-in-law's beauty.

She was vaguely aware when she came to the valley that Louise looked brighter and better than she had ever seen her look before; just as she was vaguely aware that she now looked duller and quieter, or, as she had truly said, more like her former self. But Anna was no artist, and her familiarity with that straight profile and those grave long-lashed eyes bred contempt.

She expressed her opinions so emphatically to Mrs. Morgan that the latter was almost inclined to think there must be something in them, and was vexed with her husband, who contradicted her al-

most violently when she uttered her gentle disparagements of her friend.

Dr. Morgan had perceived immediately that his wife had been talking to Miss Owen; it was always easy to trace the sources of Mrs. Morgan's conversation. She echoed the last speaker with unvarying fidelity, as she adopted the latest expressions she had heard as her own, without a moment's hesitation.

"I think you are a little weak about Mrs. Owen, dear," she said, as she had said before, but never since, the engagement of Louise to Sir Harry Gwyn.

With the rupture of that engagement her enthusiasm for her friend had slightly, but perceptibly diminished.

She had not a word of blame for Louise. Everybody knew Sir Harry had a difficult character. His own sister said an impossible one. But one's family never make allowances. Look at the way he had worshipped poor Lady Gwyn! How touchingly devoted he had been to her memory. And everyone had said he was so much in love with Mrs. Owen. It was very sad the engagement was broken off, but, there must be some reason.

When his wife took this mildly decided tone, only the doctor's true affection for her prevented him from shaking her. But he reflected that the breaking of an engagement shocked her principles; and he made allowances.

He knew also, that Louise just now, noted neither kindness nor coldness. She asked only to be let alone, and to occupy herself.

Lady Cadoc displayed better breeding by becom-

ing much kinder and more attentive to Louise than before.

She sent game, fruit, and flowers from the Castle incessantly; and wrote little scented notes begging Mrs. Owen to drive with her, or lamenting that she would not.

Also she was consumed with curiosity as to how and why her brother's engagement was broken off.

"If Margaret did the whole thing in that moment, she must be even cleverer than her mother was," said Lady Cadoc to Gwennllian. "And I used to think poor Alice the cleverest creature on earth. The way she managed your uncle was marvellous—simply marvellous. But nothing to this! To swoop down from London after ten years' estrangement and settle everything in a moment! Poor dear Mrs. Owen, she has been shamefully treated; but after all, it *was* unsuitable. And on the top of it all for Margaret to carry her father off to the Argentine with her at once, in case he should think better of it! I never heard of anything half so clever in my life."

"If she did it was abominable," said Gwennllian.

She longed unspeakably to offer comfort to Louise, but dared not. There was something in the expression of that pale gentle face which silenced Gwennllian's ready speech, and abashed her youthful confidence.

She carried baskets of grapes to the cottage, and hothouse flowers; and betrayed her almost passionate reverence and admiration for her divinity in every word and look, to the astonishment of Anna and the embarrassment of Louise; but of the subject uppermost in her thoughts she dared not speak.

"It would be an insult to offer her sympathy; but I think her heart is breaking," Gwenllian said to Dr. Morgan.

"It may come all right, dear," said the doctor, touched by her earnestness. "You must not make yourself unhappy."

"Don't you know how it happened?" she said, wistfully. "Is there nothing one can do? If I could only do anything. Was it Margaret's fault?"

"It was not Margaret's fault. There is nothing to be done for the present. Interference does more harm than good in a case like this. We must just hope for the best. Why do you not run off and pay some more visits? It is very dull for you here."

"Mother insists on my staying till Uncle Harry comes back. I'm sure I don't know why."

This was scarcely true, for Gwenllian had a very good idea why her mother wished her to remain at Morlais, since she was aware that young Harry was liable to appear there at any moment to shoot his uncle's partridges.

She was not in the habit of corresponding with her cousin, but she felt sorely tempted to send him a line and tell him what had happened; for he had left the castle immediately after the receipt of the telegram which announced Sir Harry's departure for Argentina.

But she did not like to take the breaking of such a piece of news upon herself, without sanction from her uncle.

"Do you suppose Harry knows it's all off, Mamma?" she asked her mother.

"How can I tell whether he knows? The engagement was luckily never formally announced, so

there is no need for people to run about telling each other it's at an end," said her mother. "When he comes here of course we shall talk about it quite openly, and I suppose sooner or later my brother will condescend to write to me."

Young Harry appeared unexpectedly at Morlais, at about three o'clock on a wet afternoon towards the end of September.

He found his aunt shivering over the log fire in the banqueting hall; and she hardly waited to greet him, or to hear him abuse the weather, before inquiring breathlessly whether he had heard from his uncle.

"I have heard nothing of him since I left you."

"His engagement to Mrs. Owen is definitely broken off."

Young Harry changed colour.

Then he recollected that Lady Cadoc was not the most reliable informant in the world, and asked suspiciously:

"Did he tell you himself, Aunt Belle?"

"Not a word, not a sign, not a line have I had from him since the telegram you saw the morning you went away, just after he left," said Lady Cadoc, dramatically. "*She* told me herself. I did n't like to write to you; one does not like writing that sort of thing, and besides, I expected to see you back at any moment. But she told me. Of course she is feeling it very much. I can't help being sorry for her. It must be a terrible blow when you think of all such a marriage would have brought her, and of what her position is now." Lady Cadoc shook her head sympathetically. "She looks quite changed,

and I don't wonder. But there it is. I felt sure poor Uncle Harry's fancy was too violent to last. And of course it was the position *she* was in love with. Very natural. However, she is such a remarkably good-looking woman that she will soon find a husband nearer her own age, and more suitable in every way."

Young Harry walked across the hall to the great mullioned window which lighted the breakfast recess, and stood there with his hands in his pockets, looking out at the rain dripping from the yellow trees on to the lawn.

"Are you going to drive to-day, Aunt Belle?"

"In this weather? No, indeed. I have ordered a good fire to be made up in the drawing-room. It may be a hideous room, and it may be Early Victorian, as Gwenllian says, but at any rate it is warmer than this."

Harry made no comment. He remained at the window with his back to his aunt, jingling his keys and his shillings in his pockets, and whistling softly to himself.

"Really the manners of the rising generation are shocking, quite shocking," reflected Lady Cadoc. "Young Harry used to be such a gentlemanly boy, but he is growing like all the rest."

Then she began to consider whether the present moment did not offer an admirable opportunity for a hint to her nephew that he ought to make up his mind what his intentions were regarding his cousin Gwenllian.

"Really, no occasion could be more opportune," she reflected. "At the very moment when he has learnt that his inheritance is practically safe."

With Lady Cadoc, to think was to speak; indeed she generally spoke first without troubling herself to think at all. In this case her ideas were less vague than usual, because her wishes were so very decided.

Harry gave her an opening.

"Where is Gwenllian?"

"She is somewhere about. Writing letters in her own room, I believe. I am not sorry she does n't happen to be here," said Lady Cadoc nervously, "because I want to speak to you, dear Harry. Would you mind coming over to me?" she added rather irritably. "I never know who may be lurking behind all those horrible tapestried archways."

Harry came across the hall, and took up his place on the hearthrug with his back to the burning logs.

"I was only getting away from the fire," he said apologetically. "I dare say *you* feel the place chilly, but coming from outside one does n't notice it. What did you want to say, Aunt Belle?"

His blue honest eyes looked down upon her. There was scarcely more than a general family resemblance between young Harry and his uncle; yet Lady Cadoc was reminded of her brother very strongly as her nephew stood before her, a worthy representative of British youth, with his strong square form, open countenance, and fair clean healthy colouring.

"What is it, Aunt Belle? What did you want to say?"

"About Gwenllian," faltered Lady Cadoc.

After all it was very difficult. The colour on

her soft elderly face deepened, and she had to look away from young Harry into the heart of the fire before she could regain her natural eloquence.

"You mustn't think, dear Harry, that because I haven't said anything, I haven't noticed."

"I don't know quite what you're driving at, Aunt Belle," said young Harry.

His face was scarlet now to the roots of his flaxen hair, and his light eyes angry; but he fidgeted from one foot to the other, and his obvious embarrassment restored his aunt's courage and dignity.

"If you mean me to believe, Harry, that all this time you have not been in earnest, it would be kinder to tell me so at once," she said. "It is very painful to me to have to say a word, believe me, but Gwenllian is very young—I can't have her happiness trifled away—she has no father——" Lady Cadoc dissolved into tears, her usual resort when coherence deserted her. Her tiny cobweb handkerchief failed to cover her large florid face, convulsed with genuine grief and disappointment.

"I say, Aunt Belle," said Harry, touched into kindness, yet impatient, for her tears were not infrequent enough to move him more than a very little. "I wish you would n't go on like this—you know it's—it's really awful rot, if you'll excuse my saying so. There isn't a bit of need. Gwenllian and I understand each other perfectly."

"Yes, that is what you boys and girls of the present day are so fond of saying," said Lady Cadoc, removing her gossamer handkerchief, and regarding him with very real anger. "*You understand each other*, and that is an excuse for going about together, and dispensing with *chaperons*, adopting

free and easy manners, and carrying on half a dozen flirtations at once. But what the *girls* don't seem to understand is that all these pleasant happy-go-lucky friendships are carried on at their expense. At the expense of their future happiness, and to the detriment of their chances of settling properly in life. I say the girls, for you—you boys, so long as you get your fun and their companionship while they are young and fresh and pretty, and so long as you incur no responsibilities, what do *you* care?"

Young Harry was astonished, for he had never heard his aunt speak so forcibly, nor so consecutively before. Also he was, perhaps, a little conscience-stricken.

"You forgot Gwenllian and I are cousins—it is only natural we should be good pals," he said lamely.

"Have you paid the same attention to any of your other cousins, as you have to my child?" said Lady Cadoc, tragically. "If you meant nothing more than cousinly friendship, you have behaved wrongly and cruelly, Harry. Yes, you have. You have let her waste her time with you, when she might have been free to receive the attentions of a more—I am sorry to say it—a more honourable man. I would not have thought it of you. I was so sure she was safe with you; and I have always been so fond of you, Harry," she sobbed.

"I wish you would not go on like this," said poor Harry, twisting his small bleached moustache disconsolately. "Do, do pull yourself together, Aunt Belle."

"How can I pull myself together? When I look back upon this spring and summer, all wasted and

lost," sobbed Lady Cadoc, "and Gwenllian's heart very likely broken at the end."

"Oh, I say," said Harry desperately. "Aunt Belle, you know, this is too bad."

"What on earth is the matter?" said Gwenllian, coming down the stairs.

At the sight of her daughter, Lady Cadoc rose alarmed; and still sobbing, made her way to the drawing-room.

"You had better ask your cousin," she said, and escaped as quickly as she could, lamenting still, yet secretly hoping that an explanation between the two could only lead to the *dénouement* that she desired.

"And if it does not," she reflected, dismally, "anything—anything is better than dawdling on here in this miserable state of uncertainty."

Gwenllian turned to Harry the instant her mother was out of hearing, and perceived the embarrassment and distress depicted upon his honest face.

"What is the matter? Has mamma been asking you your intentions about *me*?" she inquired calmly. "I knew she would, sooner or later. Why should that bother you, Harry? Surely we understand each other, you and I?"

At the phrase Harry started, and turned, if possible, even redder than before.

Because it seemed somehow to justify poor Lady Cadoc's attack upon his honesty.

"She's been making me feel a most awful brute," he said, in a low tone, "though of course she does n't know what she's talking of."

"Well, then why should you mind? Don't

mind," said Gwenllian, lightly. "Don't take any notice of mamma. It's just her way."

"I mind because—well because there's just a word of truth in her reproaches," he burst out, almost in spite of himself, for he was touched to something more than remorse by the loyal partisanship of his pretty little cousin. "Oh, Gwenllian, I wish I could tell you, I wish I could put things into words," he stammered, "but I don't know how, without making you think me——"

"Why don't you tell me what you mean straight out, Harry, what's on your mind? Haven't we always been chums?" she said; "have n't you always been like my own brother—not that I ever had a brother—from the time we were children staying in this old house together and in the nursery upstairs. You used to tell me everything then, and I you. You may think I'm different now because I'm grown up, but I'm not a bit different. Try me."

"You dear little thing," said Harry in a tone of relief. He was moved to take the small strong hand, tanned with much playing of out-door games, and kiss it warmly; "you always do understand, by Jove."

"Try me," Gwenllian said again.

The colour had flushed all over her fair face at the touch of young Harry's lips upon her hand, but she regarded him frankly; and took compassion upon his embarrassment.

"I think I know, Harry," she said softly. "Is it—Louise?"

She scarcely breathed the word, but the sound of that name unlocked in a moment the door of Harry's

confidence, and his confession rushed forth, incoherent, passionate—fraught with all a lover's desire for sympathy with his woes.

"By Jove, you've got it. That's just it," he said; "from the very moment I saw her first, the day—do you remember—when we went over to Brach-y-Gwynt to ask Dr. Morgan to come and dine; I've never been able to banish her image from my mind, day or night. Oh, Gwenllian, can you forget what she looked like, in her long black robes, and her soft black hair on either side that beautiful face, and those clear eyes, oh, I've fought against it, reasoned against it, battled against it, and it's been all no use. There *was* a time—Aunt Belle was so far right, that's why her words made me so uncomfortable, when—when I thought it was you, Gwenllian. Yes, you never guessed it" (this in answer to a beautiful little sound of surprise from Gwenllian), "but it was so. It was last April, when we were about in town so much together," explained poor simple Harry. "Of course I knew *you* had not the faintest idea of my feelings, let Aunt Belle say what she likes, or I could n't be speaking to you openly like this."

"Of course I had n't," said Gwenllian. She looked him in the face and uttered her poor little lie with a brave smile. "How should I?"

"How should you, indeed, when I never said a word of the kind to you," said unconscious Harry. "But the moment I set eyes on—on *her*, I knew that this was the real thing. Oh, Gwenllian, her first look at me was a smile—like a queen who sees one of her subjects, and takes it as a matter of course that he is ready to fall on his knees and worship

her. Then came the blow of her engagement, and of course I tried to be loyal—to banish her beautiful image from my mind. I even tried ——” Oh, blind egoism of young love and boyhood! He looked for sympathy into the fair face of little Gwenllian and found it; because Gwenllian, though his junior, was already a woman; able by instinct to hide her own pain, and to give him the consolation he sought. “I even tried to renew my old feelings for—for *you*, by coming here and seeking your companionship. But it was no good! Oh, Gwenllian, that this should happen to me, who have laughed all my life at the notion of any man’s falling hopelessly in love.”

“Poor boy,” said Gwenllian. She laid a kind little hand gently on his sleeve.

“For of course I thought it was quite hopeless,” said Harry in choking tones. “And I made up my mind that as soon as—as they were married, I’d exchange—go to India—do anything—not to come near this place again until I got over it, if I ever did get over it, which is n’t very likely. But then came Margaret, and that afternoon, and I felt sure they must have quarrelled when Uncle Harry went off like that, and she left the Castle; and in spite of myself I could n’t help hoping—so I went away. There did n’t seem anything else to be done. I’ve been in the most awful state of suspense thinking every day I should hear from Uncle Harry that it was all broken off. But I was determined not to come over any earlier than I should have come in the usual course. I did n’t want to take any advantage of him. But now Aunt Belle says *she* told her, herself, that her engagement is at an end.”

"Yes, she told mother before Dr. and Mrs. Morgan. Everyone knows it now; but no one has heard anything from Uncle Harry."

"I suppose he treated her badly, and is ashamed of himself, as well he may be," said Harry, wrathfully.

"Oh, Harry, she looks so pale and pitiful. I can't bear to see her; her odious sister-in-law sits on her all the time; and I am afraid they are very very poor. I don't see any comfort for her anywhere, unless Uncle Harry comes back and makes it up."

"When does he ever make things up? He took ten years to make it up with his own daughter," said Harry, vehemently. "Don't, don't put *that* into my head, Gwenllian, just when I was beginning to hope—I can't bear it."

"To hope?" Gwenllian's eyes were half doubting, half questioning. Surely—surely Harry could not mean that?

He looked away.

"Don't you think there might be just a—a chance for me, Gwen?" he said, hoarsely. "I'm not supposing she'd care about me, at first, of course, you mustn't suppose I'm such an ass as to think that possible, but you see, it's not as if she were a silly romantic girl—" he hesitated and grew redder still. "She might be brought to see that—that if she married me, she'd get back, sooner or later, everything that, as Aunt Belle says, she has lost now by not marrying him. And after all, though there may be a few years difference in our ages, on the wrong side, I grant you that;" poor Harry spoke as fiercely as though his cousin were attempting to

differ from him, "yet, it's not much, not nearly so much as the difference in age between her and _____"

A few years! Gwenllian struggled with an inclination to laugh which beset her in the midst of the very real heartache she was enduring. Ten years! Louise, beautiful as she was, naturally seemed at thirty-four a woman of very mature age indeed to little Gwenllian; whereas Harry appeared to her as a mere boy, so much younger than she was conscious of being at nineteen, that she had often wished him older.

Yet she knew she must not fail him in sympathy, the more since she was instinctively aware that only a bitter disappointment could await him.

Gwenllian's faith in the loyalty of Louise never wavered for an instant. Her mother might smile at the notion of Mrs. Owen's disinterested love for a man nearly thirty years her senior, a man rich in this world's goods as she was poor; a man as highly placed in the world's estimate, as she was lowly and of no account. But Gwenllian was young and clear-sighted, and her instincts had not been warped by worldliness; she made no such mistake in estimating the character of Louise. If she idealised her friend, yet her idealisation came nearer reality than her mother's vulgar suspicions.

Lady Cadoc's imagination had been exercised so long in the wrong direction that it was now incapable of soaring to the heights where love and truth and purity dwell, but groped incessantly upon the solid ground of material advantages.

Gwenllian winced to hear her mother's words on honest Harry's lips; but she divined that only a

despairing consciousness of the weakness of his cause, the hopelessness of his love, could have induced him to fall so far from his usual manly estate, as to quote sentiments which in his normal condition he would have utterly despised.

"Oh, Harry, what am I to say? What can I say?" said poor little Gwenllian, torn between the loyal desire to save him from further unhappiness, and the belief that the inevitable disappointment awaiting him would prove his best cure—would open his eyes, poor boy, to his own absurdity. She could not but call it an absurdity in her own heart, even loving and admiring Louise as she did.

"Still, even if she refuses you, it might make *her* a little less unhappy to know that somebody cared," she murmured half aloud, but Harry with the quickness of youth caught the words.

"That's it," he cried, gratefully. "You understand my feeling for her as well as anyone could who—who does n't love her as I do. You always understand, little Gwen, and you always stood up for her, God bless you. And as she says herself that she is no longer engaged, that it's all off—and as *he* has gone away and evidently does n't mean to mention the subject again, why, there could be no disloyalty to Uncle Harry in my having a try on my own account, could there?"

"No, none. He has brought it on himself," said Gwenllian; for she was angry with her uncle, and glad to be able on this count to speak frankly and heartily.

"Then I'll go now," said Harry, pale with determination.

"Do you mean this very minute?" She glanced

involuntarily at the steady downpour of the dismal autumn day.

"Of course I'm not such a fool as to suppose a matter like that can be settled straight off," he said, almost angrily; but she knew that his anger arose from nervousness and excitement combined, and did not resent it; "but at least I can let her know what my feelings are."

"I hope you will be able to bring her a little comfort," Gwenllian said, and once more she looked him bravely in the face and smiled on him with quivering lips, so that he looked wistfully back at her, and said with some dim compunction:

"I know I've no right to bore you with all this, Gwen, if you were n't the very best of pals—but you are—and you don't think me an absurd ass for— for loving her like this?"

"I don't see how anyone can help it," said Gwenllian.

She watched him presently, splashing away down the yew-tree avenue, with the collar of his mackintosh turned up about his neck, and a large unromantic umbrella held over his head; and she waved her hand to him as he looked round, before turning the corner.

Then she went back through the hall, and to seek her mother in the drawing-room, humming "*A frog he would a-wooing go*" to herself, and ending in a burst of laughter dangerously akin to tears.

"If only mamma could know what has come of the little talk she told me she would one day be obliged to have, with Harry!" said Gwenllian.

CHAPTER XX

THE second post, a recent institution at Glasgwm, brought Anna a long letter from old Mrs. Owen, closely written in her thin pointed writing, yet in portions crossed.

Anna was sitting in the little parlour of the cottage, with Louise, when this letter arrived; she was busily occupied in re-trimming her Sunday bonnet, and in railing bitterly at the weather.

"In London one does n't care about weather. There's always an omnibus or the Tube or the Underground, and one can go to the stores or anywhere bright and cheerful. But it's more than I can stand to go out in this dreadful red mud, and get wet through to one's very ankles, and ruin one's boots," she complained. "I won't walk about shod like a clodhopper as you do, Louise."

Anna had small feet, and was proud of the fact; she betrayed her cockney breeding by wearing thin, pointed, high-heeled shoes to walk about country lanes.

"Well, I never was so glad to get a letter before—for the more I trim this bonnet, the worse it looks. Oh! mother wants me to go back. I *thought* my absence would bring her to her senses," said Anna, with much satisfaction. She read on, and the satisfaction vanished. "How she does go on, about her loneliness and old age, not a bit like her-

self. What's this?" in a high key of indignation. "She offers to double my allowance! Did you ever! I don't take bribes, and so I shall tell her."

"Poor Aunt Emma," said Louise, suddenly touched by this manifesto of the old woman's anxiety for the return of her unlovely and unsympathetic daughter.

"If that is how she thinks to persuade me, I sha'n't go at all," said Anna, frowning.

Presently she uttered another ejaculation of surprise.

"Here is an extraordinary thing! Listen to this, Louise. How she must have been taking us in. She says she thinks she is failing fast, for she feels so weak—stuff and nonsense, she was looking as fit as a fiddle when I left—and that perhaps she has lived too hard all these years and injured her health, but that when she goes I shall learn that her only object was to save money, so that I might be enabled to keep up my position as long as I live, or marry in my own class of life." Anna flushed a dull red all over her plain face. "That she may perhaps leave behind her a sum that will surprise us all; that she has not thought it right to tell me so earlier. Well," said Anna, rather angrily, "I should have supposed I might be entitled to hear something about her affairs before I was fifty-one. But no doubt she thinks she knows best. Did you ever, Louise! To think how she's made us pinch and scrape. I never suspected *mother* of being sly," with unflattering emphasis and a glance at her sister-in-law. "I can't get over it. I don't think I'll go."

"You can't—you can't refuse her, after such an

appeal," said Louise, indignantly, "I shall go myself if you don't. Indeed, perhaps in any case I ought to offer to go and nurse her if she's ill."

Anna regarded her suspiciously.

"I think it would look very odd if *you* went, Louise, directly you heard she was better off and had money to leave behind her; after making such a point that you never intended to go back as long as you lived," she said, sourly.

Louise looked at Anna for a moment as though she thought she must be joking, and finding her perfectly serious, broke into a laugh that held more sorrow than mirth.

"Don't be afraid—I would not touch the money, even if Aunt Emma left it to me"—she said with gentle scorn. "I can earn all the money I want."

"I suppose you mean that if she *did* leave you any, you would give it all back to me," said Anna, "that is just the sort of romantic nonsensical thing you would enjoy, knowing all the time that people in our position don't accept money from one another if they have any feeling of decency; so it's just pure affectation to talk like that. I wish mother would not cross her letters, paper is cheap enough, why—" Anna grew red again, holding the letter almost at arm's length to read it more plainly, for her sight was beginning to fail her slightly.

Then she folded it up, and put it into her pocket, and took up her work again; but her agitation was so evident that Louise could not help perceiving it; she stuck velvet bows and jet flowers first on one side of her creation and then on the other, and

pulled them off again, as though she scarcely knew what she was doing.

"It seems Mr. Pollard's engagement is broken off," she said at last, with a short agitated laugh. "He has been to see mother and told her all about it. It is broken off, within a week of the wedding day."

"Poor thing," said Louise.

"Poor thing indeed. What poor thing? I suppose you mean *her*," said Anna, sharply. "*She* is anything but poor. Treacherous little cat. She has thrown him over at the last moment, and is going to marry an old friend of her husband's, another rich man on the Stock Exchange; pretending she only accepted Mr. Pollard out of pique because she thought this man didn't care for her. Bare-faced jilt. Mother says it is especially hard on him because he has incurred many expenses, supposing he was going to marry a rich woman."

The real meaning of Mrs. Owen's letter now became apparent to Louise; she felt a sudden sensation of pity for the old mother, awakened to the sense of her own loneliness, yet planning and matchmaking for a daughter half a century old.

Anna's fingers trembled as she fastened a bunch of violets on to the crown of her bonnet.

"Let me do that for you," said Louise, trying not to smile. "It really will not look well, with so many different kinds of trimming."

"Who cares how it looks?" said Anna, but she relinquished her task not unwillingly, and sat by with flaming cheeks, watching those deft fingers twist wires, lace, and flowers into the semblance of fashion.

Suddenly she started.

"There is a gentleman coming up the garden—it's that young Gwyn; he is coming to call. Quick, give me my work-basket, Louise."

She collected all the odds and ends of ribbon and flowers scattered over the table, swept them into a newspaper, and hid the crumpled packet beneath the cushion of the armchair by the fireplace. Then she seated herself with dignity, to await the advent of the visitor.

"You will hardly improve my work," said Louise, laughing.

"I won't be caught trimming my own bonnet," said Anna. "*I* have some sense of what is due to one's personal dignity, if you have none."

Louise could not help thinking that the personal dignity of Anna would have profited had she dressed herself with a little more care, and worn her scanty hair in a less rigidly screwed-up knot on the top of her head; but as she could not mend these matters against Anna's will, she prudently forbore to comment on them; and was obliged to take her sister-in-law as she was, and make the best of her.

She greeted the entrance of young Harry with a smile, and that quickening of the heart-beat, which must always acknowledge the sudden appearance of a messenger from the dwelling-place of one beloved—that centre of hope and interest.

She could not help wondering if there were a message—a letter—young Harry surely could not take sufficient interest in her to come through this pouring rain and call upon her out of mere civility or kindness. He must have been sent.

She struggled through her inquiries after Lady

Cadoc and Gwenllian; her remarks on the badness of the weather, and her hopes that he would enjoy good sport on the morrow.

Young Harry answered so much at random, and with such evident embarrassment of manner, that at length it became obvious even to Anna that he had something particular to say, and that it could not be said in her presence.

Anna resented this less than she might upon another occasion, because she was anxious to get her glasses and read through her mother's letter again.

She did not trouble herself to find any excuse for leaving, but got up from her seat with singular abruptness and marched out of the room.

But the pair she left behind were both too much relieved by her departure, to quarrel with the order of her going.

As the door shut, Louise too, rose, almost unconsciously, and moved to the fireplace, and put her hand upon the mantelpiece to steady her own sudden trembling; and young Harry came and stood beside her on the hearthrug; but he seemed unable to speak, though he had a bewildered feeling that he was somehow keeping her in suspense; and it was Louise who spoke first.

"Have you—have you heard anything of Sir Harry?" she asked, unable to keep silence longer.

Many many days had passed since she had uttered the beloved name, and it sounded strange in her own ears. "I think you must have come to tell me something?" she said; her dark eyes questioned him even more poignantly than her faltering accents. "If you have, tell me as quickly as you can, won't you?"

"It's nothing, nothing, about my uncle. We've heard no more," he muttered. "It was n't about that I came. It was n't about anything important."

Poor Harry's heart beat thick with disappointment, with suppressed excitement, and a surging angry sympathy—all in one.

Could she think of no one, after all, but Sir Harry? Was it possible that in spite of Aunt Belle's wisdom, in spite of his uncle's advanced age—in spite of all probabilities to the contrary—that she ——?

She had hidden her face in her hands.

"I did n't suppose there was any use in my coming," he said, unsteadily, "but I—I ventured to come."

"Oh, what must you think of me?" said Louise, in muffled tones. She looked up and tried to smile; and he saw with passionate consternation that her dark eyes were wet and her lips pale. "I—I am so foolish, I fancied you might have come to speak of my own affairs. Why should you? Forgive me."

"But—but it was of you I came to speak," the young man stammered. "I thought—I fancied——"

"That my engagement with Sir Harry was broken off? Yes, you are quite right. It is broken off."

"Then why—why should you think of him still?" he said, with his blue eyes full of doubt and misery and reproach, yet also of worship.

She looked at him wistfully. "Ah, why—why indeed?"

She was so very lovely as she said the words, that young Harry's ardour of love was redoubled, and he broke into incoherent fervent speech.

"Why should you think of him? He's gone, and

it's all over, and—and there are others," he cried, passionately, "who would give anything to be able to comfort you, to give you back all you've lost, Louise. Who—who've worshipped you ever since they saw you first." Having begun in the third person plural, poor Harry floundered in vain, trying to get out of it, and continuing to use it only because he was so desperately anxious to say all that was in his heart before Louise could stop him. "Who've been eating their hearts out ever since they first heard of his going, who've come to you on the wings of the wind directly they knew for certain that you were free."

"Oh, my poor boy, hush," she said.

Harry paused for breath, and because he was ashamed of his own vehemence.

"I know I'd no business to say it all without your leave," he said, "but what is a fellow to do? When Gwenllian said you were alone and unhappy, and that perhaps it might comfort you a little to know how much one poor fellow—that is n't worthy to tie your shoe-strings—loves you."

"Gwenllian! What have you done?" she said, turning white. "You have told her!"

"Why not? She's loyal to you. She cares for you almost as much as I do," he said, trying to laugh. "No, not as much, that's absurd, but she would give anything to make you happier. She said so."

"Even to this! Poor loyal generous little Gwenllian; and oh, you cruel, cruel boy," cried Louise.

He did not heed her words, though they came back to him many times afterwards; for just now,

he could think only of his love, and of her heartless indifference.

"How can you talk of Gwennllian now?" he said, with tragic reproach. "Don't you see it's life and death to me, Louise? Of course if—if you really care for *him*, it's no good. I know that. But I thought perhaps you did n't really care—especially now, since he went away like that."

"You thought I did n't really care!" She looked at him wondering; and he avoided her eyes, ashamed and conscience-stricken.

"I thought perhaps, it was all on his side," said young Harry, desperately, for he felt that the words must be said now or never, "and so I determined to come and ask you straight out, to try and forget the past, and marry me. I'm not worthy of you, but I'd make you happy. I *would*. You don't know. You should do anything you liked. You should never hear a word you did n't like."

"Oh, my poor boy, hush," she said again.

"You call me a boy," he said angrily and jealously, "but I'm not a boy, I'm practically four and twenty, and I've seen a good deal of the world—far more than you have. And after all, I'm nearer your own age than ——"

He never finished the sentence, for she put her cool soft hand upon his hot trembling fingers, that were clutching the edge of the mantelpiece, and led him, unresisting, to the high settee before the parlour window.

"Sit here by me," she said softly, "and listen. I'm sorry I called you a boy. Of course you're not a boy, but a man. If you seem to me a hundred years younger than I, it is only because I have been

through so much sadness, so much dreariness, that my life has seemed much much longer than it really is. But because you're a man I can speak to you as I would not to a boy."

She coloured and hesitated, but he did not interrupt. He was sitting beside her; she was speaking softly and kindly; her dear hand was holding his in a gentle clasp. In that moment young Harry was almost happy.

"I am very grateful to you. You've done me the greatest honour a man can do a woman," she said, instinctively choosing words to soothe his wounded dignity, and to soften the consciousness that must come to him presently of his colossal mistake. "And you've come to me in my sorrow and my loneliness, as a true knight would to a woman in distress; but because you are a true knight, and a man of the world, you know that though a man may love many times and ride away—yet when a woman of my age loves, it must be for always. Think of me"—that laugh through her tears was characteristic of Louise—"as of Mariana in her Moated Grange. *He cometh not, she said.* I don't think he will ever come. Because I gave him just cause for anger, and he was angry, and you know he does not forgive easily. Perhaps he will never forgive me; but that will make no difference to my love. Whether he chooses to claim it or not, that belongs to him and to him only, for ever and ever and ever. There is no question of happiness for me without him. No other man ever has been or ever will be in my heart. Now do you understand?"

Young Harry lifted the hand that held his, to his lips, and kissed it over and over again.

"Yes, I understand," he said miserably, yet bravely. "God bless you. I'll—I'll take myself off, and not trouble you any more. Forgive me for—for coming. You see I did n't know."

"No, you did n't know," she said.

Then bethinking herself, she added, "Will you do me a favour?"

"You know I will."

"Tell Gwennllian what I have told you," she said softly. "You have both been so good to me, so loyal, that I should like you both to understand me, and to know that I am grateful."

"Well, what was it? I saw something was in the wind," said Anna. "He sat fidgeting and growing as red as a beet, until I felt quite uncomfortable. I thought he was going to propose to you. Perhaps he did? Oh, you need n't tell me if you don't want to. But if you don't of course I have a right to surmise what I like."

Louise hesitated. She had no wish to take Anna into her confidence, nor to betray young Harry; but she was aware that to confide in Anna was the only way to ensure her discretion.

When she was trusted she could be discreet; when she was not, she could be both offended and garrulous. Louise dreaded lest her sister-in-law should be inspired, in a moment of pique and boredom, to share her surmises with Mrs. Morgan, who would certainly in her turn whisper the same into the ears of Lady Cadoc. Poor Harry.

"Anna, of course I will tell you, if you will regard it now and hereafter, as a sacred confidence."

"I'm as safe as a house," said Anna, and her face became alight with interest.

"Then you are right. That poor boy came here to ask me to marry him, in the kindness and simplicity of his heart."

"And you refused him?"

"Naturally I refused him," said Louise, simply. "I explained to him how matters stood with me, and he took it very well, and went away. Now you know it all, and I beseech you not to refer to it any more."

"Of course I won't breathe it to a soul. You know very well I'm to be trusted. But I can't but speak my mind to *you*, when you tell me a thing like that," said Anna, angrily, and yet not unkindly. "It's all very well for you to call him a boy, but he's of age, and a far more suitable age too than ever your old man was for you. If *he* does n't mind your being a few years older than he is, why should you? I think all this pother about the man happening to be younger than the woman is absurd. Nobody ever says a word when it's the other way about. And yet you go and refuse him, when he can give you everything the old man offered and a lot more besides."

"What besides?"

"Why, his youth, and good temper, and good looks, and good health, and everything people set so much store by in this time-serving disappointing world," said Anna, bitterly. "And if you fling it all away, because you fancy yourself in love with a man who's thrown you over—I know he has, for you'd never have had spirit to give *him* the boot, I know you far too well—why, I say you're a down-

right fool, Louise; and if nobody else will tell you so, I will."

"You can say what you like to me, Anna; but if you knew how unhappy I am, I think you would spare me a good many hard words," said Louise.

"Don't I know?" said Anna, and her angry tones softened, "because I have n't the knack of speaking smoothly, and flattering you like all these people about here, who seem to have turned your head between them, you think I'm hard-hearted, and don't care for you. Let me tell you I have your real interests at heart quite as much as they have."

"I have never doubted it, Anna. If I had doubted that, I don't think I could have borne the things you sometimes say to me."

"Then why don't you listen to me?" Anna perched herself on the corner of the square table, and wagged a bony forefinger down upon Louise, who sat in a low chair before the fire, and looked up at her, faintly smiling; wearied by her persistence, and her loud harsh tones. "Why don't you listen? You think because you're good-looking now, you'll get other chances, or perhaps that your old man will come back. But I can tell you," said Anna, bitterly, "that you'll get older and uglier every day of your life, so gradually that *you* won't notice it, but other people will, and that men *don't* come back. They go after someone younger and prettier, and you get left in the lurch. It's all very well now, with the doctor here petting and praising you, and people proposing to you all round. But how will you feel twenty years hence, when you're as old as I am now, and you sit here alone. Too old to be petted and praised any more,

but with lots of life in you yet which has got to be lived through somehow, and your old man dead and buried and forgotten."

"Anna—Anna!"

"I'm talking plain sense, your old man dead and gone, and your young one married to some other woman, and putting her in the place that might have been yours in that fine Castle over there that you pretend to be so fond of. How often you'll look out of this window then—if you stick to this dull hole—and wish you'd been less romantic and more sensible. Why, if you had a spark of spirit left in you at all," said Anna contemptuously, "you'd marry young Gwyn and snap your fingers at his uncle. The estates are entailed, and it is n't very likely he'll go through the farce of getting engaged all over again, so fond of quarrelling as he appears to be."

"No," said Louise, "I agree with you it is not very likely. You've said your say, Anna, and I know you mean kindly. But I must manage my affairs my own way."

"Well, you'll do as you like, of course," said Anna, "I can't prevent you. But I've told you what I think. Perhaps you'll come to see the truth of my remarks when I'm gone. For I came down to tell you that now I've read mother's letter again, I've come to the conclusion that it's my duty to go back and look after her; so you'll be quit of me to-morrow."

"To-morrow!"

"When I make up my mind to do a thing, I do it at once. There's no shilly-shally about me," said Anna, firmly.

Harry and Gwenllian were together once more; side by side upon her favourite window-seat in the banqueting hall.

"Yes, I have failed," he said, "but at least it is a comfort to think she knows. And—and you've been a true pal, Gwenllian, if ever there was one in this world, both to her and to me. I shall go out to India now, anyway, whatever happens. But you'll write to me sometimes, won't you, little girl?"

"Of course I will, old boy. I'll never miss a mail."

"And Aunt Belle need never know what's happened. You'll say nothing to her?"

"That's the last thing I should do," said Gwenllian. "To make a confidence to mamma is to repent yourself day and night until she's forgotten what you've told her, and ceased to remind you of it."

"I don't know what she'd think of me," said Harry, bitterly.

"What does it matter?" said his faithful comforter. "What does it matter what anyone thinks, Harry, so long as you and I understand each other?"

CHAPTER XXI

A BRILLIANT October day; the autumn roses bloomed bravely, though their death knell sounded faintly in the chill breath of the morning air.

Still the ivy geraniums made summer on the old stone walls, the dahlias crowded the garden beds with colour, the waxen faces of the pale anemones looked forth from their bushes of sturdy branching leaf, and the sunflowers stretched upwards great brown and golden discs.

Butterflies, yellow and white, painted peacocks and transparent tortoise-shell, enjoyed a brief renewal of life in the sunshine; and over the Michaelmas daisies and in and out of the mouths of the snapdragons, buzzed the humble-bees.

But the Virginia creeper had blushed scarlet; the apples were dropping into the long lush orchard grass, and the pear-trees groaned beneath a burden of brown fruit.

The lavender bush had been shorn now of its scented crop, which was dried, and laid away among the slender store of household linen, in the little white cupboard on the stairs.

The long shadows of early morning fell across the meadows clothed with mist and wet with dew; the robins sang in chorus.

Summer was gathering her worn green garments sorrowfully about her, poisoning herself yet for a mo-

ment to take a lingering regretful backward glance ere she bade the little valley among the mountains farewell.

This morning, Louise, looking forth as her custom was, from her open casement upon the new day, felt something of the charm of her solitary cottage restored, and realised a little lightening of the daily burden of her life.

For Anna had gone, and she was once more alone with her dreams and her love and her sorrow.

She might linger over her dressing, for there was no indignant voice to reprove her if she chanced to be late. She might open the door of the porch, and inhale the freshness of the morning air in the warmly-walled garden, before sitting down to her humble solitary meal, for Anna was not there to complain of the draught. She might, oh greatest luxury of all, be once more herself, and neither order her manner, nor her words, nor her looks, to fit that stereotyped pattern of an earlier self who was the real Louise in Anna's eyes.

There was no one to accuse her of affectation if she lingered lovingly to watch the last gleam of reflected sunset die over the hills; no one to reproach her for idleness though she sat for hours dreaming in the morning sunshine.

Peace crept through the open doorway of the cottage as Miss Owen jerked herself down the garden path and into the waiting fly in the lane below; and was made visible in the relieved expression of Mrs. Jones; in the glad smile of the gardener who carried the corded trunk in the wake of the parting guest; in the blessed silence which fell upon the sunny garden and homely brown dwelling.

On the breakfast table in the little parlour lay a letter in a strange handwriting with a foreign stamp.

Louise put her hand to her throat, for she felt the great pulsing throbs caused by her suddenly quickening heart-beats almost painfully; she was thankful to be alone, free from the watch of cold and critical eyes, so that there was no need to hide the trembling that possessed her.

She opened the letter with shaking hands, hoping

. . .
It was from Margaret.

“DEAR, DEAR LOUISE,

“What have you thought, what have you suffered all this time? I have wondered if in your heart you must not have doubted my truth and friendship many times, and suspected me of playing you false and carrying my father away from you altogether. But I had no faintest thought of his coming with me. I think he must have decided upon doing so only at the last moment.

“He left me and sent off some telegrams—I hope he sent one to you—but he spoke to me only of those he sent to Morlais, so I cannot be sure.

“Believing we should part at Southampton, I tried, on the way there, to speak of you again; but he asked me to say no more in a tone that closed the subject. I am resolved nevertheless to say something of what is in my mind before we part.

“I would have telegraphed to you myself, but it was too late by the time I knew he was actually coming, and moreover, I hardly knew what to say in a telegram, and had in my mind the curiosity of

the village postmistress, my father's possible anger, the probability of his having telegraphed to you himself—so I went straight to my berth, from which I have scarcely yet struggled up, being the most wretched of sailors.

“But it is well I have put off, since I have now had time to observe and to reflect, and to think what words may best give you exactly and faithfully my impressions.

“This I can tell you—my father is very unhappy. It breaks my heart to see him pacing up and down the deck of the ship, shaking off the people who try to talk to him, glaring at them from under his eyebrows, you know his way. . . .

“I feel that he came with me only because he was so unhappy that he did not know what to do with himself. Because he was afraid he would give way if he saw you. From words he has let drop, I am sure you are continually in his mind, and I write as I do because I believe that until he is reconciled to you he will never have another happy moment. . . . I gave him the letter you had written to me, and he returned it without comment, but he would not read it before me. He carried it away with him to his cabin, pretending not to care—just like a boy!

“My word of comfort I retain for the last. From what he says he will not come further than Buenos Ayres with me. He will not come to my home. He talks of the sea voyage doing good to his health, and that it will be best for him to take the first steamer back. But he is so restless that I should never be surprised if he left the ship at the next port we touch after St. Vincent where I shall post

this—Pernambuco or Rio—according to what he hears of the dates of returning steamers. I have been so ill that he has scarcely been able to see me till now, so perhaps he would not like to leave me earlier than at Buenos Ayres, but I cannot help telling you of the possibility; and if he leaves me there, he could be at Morlais again by the end of October.

“I hope you will see him then, and I earnestly hope that this letter will bring you a little comfort. I know too well how dreary is silence, silence, silence, when one is breaking one’s heart for want of a word. There is no worse punishment in this world.

“Dear Louise, I write as though I had known you for years, for I write as I feel. That moment in the chapel showed me your heart. I show you mine.

“I am always your friend,

“MARGARET.”

“God bless Margaret,” said Louise, trembling.

Hope, which dies so hard, struggled to life in her breast yet once more.

That picture of Sir Harry restlessly pacing the deck—how plainly it rose before her mental vision. His tall gaunt figure, mighty proportions, fierce grey moustache, and bushy grizzled eyebrows forming a penthouse above glittering blue eyes.

The thought of his silent unhappiness moved her to tears, but through her tears shone a faint smile of tenderness and remembrance of happy hours.

It seemed as though a word must put all right; and yet—what word would restore his lost confidence in her?

It was too early yet to carry the letter to Brach-y-Gwynt, where breakfast was at a much later hour than at the Hafod, and where the conventionalities of Mrs. Morgan had to be respected.

But Louise could not stay indoors. She set forth to climb the hill at the back of the cottage, and inquire at that yet humbler cottage on the heights above, after the little boy whom she had nursed back to convalescence.

Ah, how beautiful seemed that walk in the light of the hope which shone anew from her dark eyes.

The recent heavy rains rushing down the side of the hill, had turned the steep and narrow lanes that threaded the woods and meadows, into water-courses, and ploughed deep channels through them, uprooting heavy stones, and flinging them into heaps in the middle of the paths; though these were now dry enough, the walking was certainly very rough; but Louise trod as though upon air.

The thousand wonders of the hedgerows were still new to her, and she marked them with lingering delight, for she had time and to spare; the tender wild strawberry plants thrusting their way through the wet moss; the roots of sycamores, from which the ground had crumbled, jutting forth and forming earthy caverns, haunted by tiny bright-eyed living creatures; the young saplings of ash, and the sturdy hawthorn springing above miniature ravines of red sandstone, where the tangle of last year's dead growth, of creeping ivy, rotting twigs, and delicate skeleton leaves sheltered the roots of the harts-tongue and the wild fern, and the mouth of many a rabbit hole.

The nuts dangled ripe above the blackberries, too

plentiful to be worth the gathering of the scattered and scanty population of the hills; the hedge-fruit shone in every hue of purple and red and green and glossy black.

A whole busy insect world was to be found by a close observer within the measure of a few inches of moss and mould.

Above her head the drooping branches of the larch met the wild shoots of the brambles, and formed a network through which the October sun played fitfully upon her path.

The coppices on the heights had been thinned during the previous winter, and the light autumn wind wandered across the open spaces, and fluttered the leaves of the baby saplings already sprung from the denuded storrs. Straight and slender young oaks stood forth, smooth-barked beech, and silver-stemmed birch; each bare and solitary, deprived of the companionship and shelter of older and weaker brethren; the survival of the fittest.

The faggots were piled in stacks, penned by sharp stakes driven into the ground, and awaiting removal.

The sun now reached the hollows which had once been hidden in the darkest recesses of the woods, and in response, myriads of slumbering seeds had sprung into life; the jays flew screaming across old haunts become unrecognisable; and the rooks cawed from groups of ancient trees sacred to their habitation, which had outlived many fellings of lighter timber.

Johnny's heart was gladdened by a visit from his Black Lady, and by the gifts she brought in her hand; and his mother was gladdened by the oppor-

tunity for a little gossip, so seldom afforded to her; then Louise was free to descend the mountain path once more.

She was about to turn the corner of the lane which branched on the one side to the Hafod, and on the other to the doctor's house, when she perceived the black-coated figure of a man toiling up the steep ascent, and she paused; for something in his air and outline appeared familiar to her.

But the doctor did not wear a black coat, and though for a moment she thought it must be the rector of Glaschw, a pleasant, cheerful, and unpretentious Welshman with whom she was on the friendliest terms; yet a second glance showed her that the advancing figure was neither burly, nor bearded, nor upright as was Mr. Williams—but tall, thin, and stooping.

It was Mr. Pollard.

Louise started; but instantly repressed her inclination to laugh.

Poor Anna. To have missed him by a day.

She went hurriedly forward, holding out her hand, and smiling; and he took off his broad felt hat and smiled also, as though in relief that he should be so evidently and so kindly welcomed.

"This is a great surprise," said Louise, "but I am very glad to see you—only I am afraid, it is very unfortunate—but you have missed Anna, for she started yesterday."

"Already! I did not anticipate that," he said, rather nervously. "I must tell you I—I had Mrs. Owen's sanction for my sudden descent upon you, I am afraid you will think it requires explanation. But the fact is I—I was starting for a little holi-

day, a little tour in this district, and it occurred to me to take this place by the way. I stayed at the inn last night, and determined to come up the first thing this morning."

He was out of breath with the climb to the village, and poured out his explanation so fast that he was presently obliged to stop in order to recover himself.

Louise observed him attentively as he leant upon his stick, and put his hand to his side.

"I am not used to hills," he said apologetically.

"You should not have hurried so," she said kindly. "But you have no further to climb. This door in the wall leads to my abode."

She opened it and showed him into the pleasantly ordered enclosure, which never looked more inviting than when thus entered from the wildness of the overgrown lane without.

But neither its beauty nor its neatness, called forth the delighted comment for which she had hoped from Mr. Pollard.

Besides being town-bred, and indifferent to the beauties of nature, he was exceedingly short-sighted; and thus he scarcely noted his surroundings at all as he picked his way carefully over the stones; absorbed in contemplation of his own footsteps and in his thoughts on the errand which had brought him to this out-of-the-way valley.

"You will come in and rest, and let Mrs. Jones bring you some breakfast or luncheon, or something, won't you?" she asked, disappointed by his silence, yet enjoying the novel prospect of entertaining her first guest; for it had been impossible to regard Anna as a guest at all, since from the instant she

had set foot in her sister-in-law's house she had taken complete possession of it.

"Thank you. I have breakfasted. But if I may, I will certainly come in and rest," he said, and followed her up the stone steps and through the garden.

"You see my house is very small," said Louise, who could not help pausing for a moment before the brilliant foliage of the Virginian creeper as she entered. Surely Mr. Pollard could not be blind to this splendid curtain carelessly draped by nature's hand about the entrance to her cottage.

"Yes, it is small, but quite large enough for one person. I think the worst part of it is the steepness of the approach," said Mr. Pollard, still panting, but he was not moved to pronounce any panegyric upon the abode of Louise.

She led the way into her sitting-room, and here he felt more at home than in the garden; he put his soft hat upon the table, drew his chair close to the little wood fire blazing warmly on the old-fashioned hearth, and spread out his thin hands to the warmth.

"This is very pleasant," he said in a relieved tone.

Louise took the easy chair on the other side of the hearth and sat there, facing him, with her hands clasped in her lap.

His presence brought back to her very vividly the days of her residence in the Kensington lodging; when he had always been a kind and welcome visitor.

Yet as she looked at his mild, earnest face and short-sighted, gentle, brown eyes, she wondered that Anna should find his personality an attractive one.

"I suppose she feels instinctively that she is strong and he is weak," thought Louise. "He does not look strong in health, either. I am sure he works too hard."

"You will have heard," said Mr. Pollard, nervously, "that my—er—intended marriage—is—not to be?"

"Yes," Louise said. She hesitated, not knowing whether to express sympathy or not. Mr. Pollard did not look like a broken-hearted man. On the contrary had she been required to analyse his expression, she would have declared that relief was its principal ingredient.

"I feared you would condole with me. You are the first person who has not attempted to condole," said Mr. Pollard, with a faint smile. "It was so very embarrassing that I felt constrained to leave home for a while; until the episode should more or less have passed from people's minds." He paused and looked at Louise, but she waited in silence.

"We are old friends," he said hurriedly.

"Yes, indeed." Her tone conveyed more kindness than her words.

"I may speak to you frankly," said Mr. Pollard, entreatingly. "I do not know that I could very well explain to anyone less—less understanding, or delicate in mind and sympathy than yourself. It was a very unfortunate affair. I hear *she* is blamed, but that is because people do not know. Personally, I am very far from blaming her. It was entirely my own fault. I ought to have seen more clearly how unsuitable it was."

He paused and looked into the fire.

"But if I put it to you even in a few words, *you*

will realise how it happened. She was very pretty, very impetuous, and she loved a man who she imagined had an affection for her. Then there was a misunderstanding, and she believed he cared for her no longer, so in a moment of despair she resolved to give up the world, and to devote herself and her future to good works. She sought my aid and guidance, and finally," he coloured faintly, "for a time, I was weak enough to believe she was attracted towards me for my own sake. I do not wish to disguise my weakness from you. There were certain delicate advances on her side which flattered my vanity, in the beginning. But it appears I was included in her scheme of self-sacrifice."

"That was very hard upon you," Louise could not help exclaiming.

"I ought to have realised," he said, shaking his head, "that she was not of a disposition nor of an age to be attracted by a serious man like myself. But for the moment, she held my fancy in thrall." He paused again, and added apologetically, "I assure you it was no more than my fancy—you might even say, my pity. I had not the faintest notion of making such a marriage. But she appeared to be so much in earnest; and she had a very alluring manner. But nothing could have been more unsuitable; and I assure you, that when she came to know her own mind and explained her mistake to me, the relief I experienced was—was quite overwhelming."

"It is fortunate it came in time."

"I assure you that is what I feel," he said gratefully. "Fortunate for her, and most *most* fortunate for me. I *knew* you would understand my

feeling. The world would have deemed I was making an excellent marriage, but it was one utterly at variance with all my previous hopes—all my present wishes.”

Once more he returned to the phrase which appeared to sum up the situation more completely to his satisfaction than any other.

“Unsuitable, most unsuitable. Painfully unsuitable,” he murmured absently, as though afflicted by uncomfortable memories of his engagement.

There was another, longer silence, broken at last by Louise.

“You have seen my aunt? Did you think her very much changed, or aged, or looking ill? She wrote such a melancholy letter to Anna, a letter so unlike herself, urging her to return, that I have felt quite anxious.”

“I cannot say I observed much difference,” said Mr. Pollard, after conscientious reflection. “No, none at all. She looked much as usual. She told me she wished her daughter to return. She spoke to me of money that had accumulated—a legacy from her own family; and said she regretted not having made known to her friends that during the past few years she has been better off than was supposed. I told her that all unnecessary concealments were to be regretted.”

“Anna knew nothing of it.”

“So Mrs. Owen informed me. She said Miss Owen would be comfortably off. Between seven and eight hundred a year. I was greatly surprised, and I think it very hard upon her that her mother should have kept such a secret,” said Mr. Pollard.

"I can neither imagine her motive for doing so, nor for telling me the fact now."

"She is fond of saving for saving's sake, I think," said Loiuise. "It has become a habit."

She did not endeavour to explain to Mr. Pollard the motives which had induced Mrs. Owen to tell him of her daughter's prospects, though she saw them very clearly herself.

"Mrs. Owen also spoke of you," said Mr. Pollard.

Louise smiled faintly. "I suppose she spoke of me—as usual," she said.

"It was her way of speaking of you that—that induced me to—to seek you without further delay," he said, reddening perceptibly. "Otherwise it is very probable that I should not have ventured to come—so soon after——"

Louise flushed in turn; but it was a flush of vexation and uneasiness.

Mr. Pollard's manner left no doubt of what was coming, and she knew not how to avert it.

He leant forward, peering eagerly into her face with his short-sighted eyes.

"You are so unlike other women, in your beautiful and gentle charity," he said hurriedly, "that I venture to hope you will forgive me for coming to you at once—that you will not resent my haste. That you will believe me when I tell you that I have never felt towards any other woman as I feel towards you, and as I have always felt; the most unbounded admiration, and sympathy—and—and pure and true affection. The instant I was free from that most mistaken engagement my thoughts returned to you as to the embodiment of all that was most dear, most—most suitable," he stammered,

unable to detach himself from the expression that haunted his mind.

"Please say no more," said Louise, entreatingly. "I understand perfectly. Believe me, I do not misjudge you at all. I am very far indeed from resenting, anything—but it is impossible."

"Why impossible?" he said gently. "We have been friends always—for so many years—I hope I may say great friends."

Louise felt he might say anything he chose, but that their friendship had been so entirely on the surface that he would not even comprehend her if she told him how completely she felt herself a stranger to him in reality.

"There is just the right difference in age between us. I honour and esteem your beautiful character, which has been open to my observation for so many years, and under such painful and trying circumstances. I must confess that I have even thought you must be more angel than woman," said Mr. Pollard with emotion. "I would try and make up to you, by my devotion, for all that you have suffered. Surely, surely, at your age, and under the circumstances, you cannot have any prejudices against a second marriage? I assure you that you need have none; and it is my dearest wish to make you my wife."

The life in the Kensington lodging which had of late become so misty and indistinct, became vivid once more in the recollection of Louise. She recalled a shadowy circle of expectant spinsters who had for years surrounded Mr. Pollard; worshipping, waiting, and wondering to whom he would presently turn for perpetual consolation.

Mr. Pollard was not a vain man; he was naturally rather of a humble disposition; but he could not have remained unaware of the simple fact that several excellent and devoted female members of his congregation desired to marry him.

Perhaps that fact had even unconsciously influenced his opinion of women in general; so that there was surprise as well as pain in his ejaculation.

"Surely! Surely!"

Louise could not smile at this utterance, for though his intonation half amused, it also half offended her. But to inflict disappointment upon anyone was absolutely painful to her, and she was besides full of sympathy and regret upon Anna's account.

Poor Anna, who, oblivious of her fifty-one years, and mindful of her newly discovered fortune, had hastened to London possessed by an unlikely dream.

But amidst the conflicting feelings which beset her, there was room for a swift momentary scorn.

Were the women of to-day to be thus easily won with a word—that he should utter so incredulous a protestation at her refusal?

She cast a lightning thought backwards to a tempestuous wooer whose methods were those of a by-gone and perhaps more chivalrous generation. A bright colour made her beautiful face more beautiful as she looked at Mr. Pollard.

"I have no prejudices against a second marriage," she said, with her usual gentleness; but perhaps more than her usual distinctness. "But I cannot marry you, Mr. Pollard. It was very kind

of you to wish it, even for a moment. But let us never speak of it again. I hope you will speak of it to no one. I need hardly say I never shall."

Mr. Pollard was silent; more from astonishment than from any other cause, she felt sure; and again that amused resentment touched her regard of his hasty and ill-considered suit.

But the dejection of his tone disarmed her.

"Is there—can there be—already—somebody else?" he faltered, almost reproachfully.

The lovely colour deepened.

"Yes, there is somebody else," said Louise.

He was silent; startled by the illumination of her face, and realising her beauty as he had perhaps never realised it before.

"In that case, I have made my long journey in vain," he said sadly. "Well—well."

He was so much mortified and confused that she sought hurriedly for a fresh topic.

"Won't you tell me what Aunt Emma said of me? Was it very bad? Much worse than usual?"

"I hope I did not give you the impression that she was abusing you, or saying anything in your disfavour," he said alarmed, but with attention momentarily diverted, as Louise had hoped. "It was nothing that mattered in the least."

She looked disappointed.

"I don't see why I should not tell you," he said wistfully. "After all, it is my only excuse for coming so soon, with so little preparation or inquiry beforehand. She gave me to understand that you were very badly off; with nothing to supplement your small private means but—but an allowance from her, continued voluntarily since the death of

her son; and her manner made me realise what it must be to one so gentle and sensitive as you are, to be in any way dependent upon her. So I did not wait. That is all; not worth mentioning, but as an excuse for my haste," said Mr. Pollard, tremulously. "I have not much to offer you. I am not a rich man; but I thought at least I could release you from——"

"Oh, Mr. Pollard, how can I thank you! You make me ashamed! It was noble, it was generous of you to come," cried Louise, surprised and touched. "Indeed I thank you with all my heart. But I did not know—I had no idea Aunt Emma was allowing me money. I would not have taken a penny from her had I known, for I am well able to earn my own living. I am dependent on no one." She thought of an uncashed cheque, laid away among her greatest treasures, and her eyes filled with tears. "I thought—I thought it was Frederick's."

"Frederick's!" Mr. Pollard was surprised in his turn. "I know as a fact that poor Frederick had nothing of his own in the world."

Mr. Pollard was gone, and Louise was left alone with her thoughts, which were not destitute of a shade of self-reproach.

All unknowing she had accepted as a right the pension she owed to the charity of her husband's mother; and amid all her harshness and all her want of sympathy, Mrs. Owen had never allowed her to suspect that it was so. Anna, too, must have known. Yet neither of them had spoken. They

had allowed her to quit their roof, and enjoy her supposed independence to the full.

"Oh, if people would be noble all through, or mean all through," thought Louise, "how easily one could place them; but to find kindness, delicacy, generosity, where one has learnt to despise and dislike—and to be conscious of one's own blindness, unworthiness—one's own ingratitude."

She sat down before her little desk, and wrote to Anna, telling her of Mr. Pollard's visit, and of the item of information he had unintentionally brought her, and making her acknowledgment of her aunt's kindness in a very humble and contrite spirit, though she declined at the same time to benefit by it in future.

But of Mr. Pollard's proposal her letter conveyed to Anna no shadow of a hint; on the contrary, poor Louise, in her sympathy and her irresistible desire to please, could not help adding her regrets that Mr. Pollard should have come a day too late to find her sister-in-law; and even a further postscript to the effect that he had already bidden her good-bye, and was leaving Glascewm immediately.

CHAPTER XXII

SIR HARRY sat opposite his friend the doctor in the library at Morlais, smoking a large cigar.

He had telegraphed in the morning to warn his sister of his intended arrival, and Lady Cadoc had sent over to Brach-y-Gwynt at once, and hurriedly invited Dr. and Mrs. Morgan, and the married daughter who was staying with them, to dine at the Castle.

"It will make it so much less awkward," she wrote privately to Mrs. Morgan, "if you will be good enough to come; a family party on such occasions is the most detestable thing in the world; and leads to explanations, of all things to be avoided. And I shall be so anxious to know, besides, whether Dr. Morgan thinks that the voyage has improved my brother's health."

The doctor was given every opportunity of judging, for after dinner Sir Harry took him to the smoking-room, leaving Lady Cadoc to entertain her friend and her friend's daughter, and young Harry to play billiards with Gwenllian.

There was no doubt that the voyage had improved Sir Harry's health. His natural robustness appeared to be entirely restored.

His strong frame was vigorous and upright, the wholesome ruddy tints of his sunburnt face clear

and healthful, his eyes bright and keen; only his whitened hair and the deep furrows between his bushy eyebrows betrayed his sixty years.

Throughout the evening he had evinced no sign of low spirits; he had said repeatedly that he was glad to be at home again, and discussed the prospects of the morrow's shooting with young Harry, as eagerly as a boy; but now that he was alone with his friend his assumed jollity vanished.

"Look here, Morgan, you've been thinking of something all the evening, out with it," he said, rather grimly.

"What else could I be thinking of?" said Dr. Morgan. "I'm sorry if I let it appear, however."

"I don't suppose my sister noticed it, if you mean that," retorted Sir Harry, "but I know you perhaps a trifle better than she does."

"You have opened the subject, and I am much obliged to you," said the doctor, in tones no less grim than his own, "believing as I do, that in your heart you must be consumed with self-reproach."

"Would to God I were," said Sir Harry, bitterly. "Do you suppose I would not rather blame myself, a thousand times, than another."

"I am sure at least, that you could forgive yourself a great deal sooner," said the doctor drily.

Sir Harry laughed rather angrily.

"Perhaps I expect less from myself. You must make allowance if I am unreasonable, I have suffered a somewhat bitter disappointment."

"So long as you refuse to recognise the fallibility of human nature in others, what but disappointment can await you?"

"I am willing to hear, if needs be, the counsel for

the defence," said Sir Harry. He forced himself to laugh again, but his keen blue eyes expressed more eagerness than he was aware.

"What defence does she need?" said the doctor, moved instantly to anger. "She tried to tell you how it happened, at the time, and you would not listen. You left her to the misery of suspense. I know well enough, though she did not tell me, that she sat up all night, writing her poor little letter of excuse, and pleading, and explanation of a moment's weakness—and when she would have sent it there came the news of your desertion."

Sir Harry growled offendedly.

"I use the word advisedly," said the doctor, "I look upon it as desertion; after all you have been to each other; after all—if you need reminding—that she was to you in your great need."

"Can you make no allowance for my rage, my despair when I found that my idol had—feet of clay," said Sir Harry. "I felt afterwards, I knew afterwards, that I was wrong to go off as I did. It was the impulse of a moment."

"Then go and tell her so," said the doctor, in a low voice. "Have pity—don't keep her waiting longer."

Sir Harry smoked in silence. Then he sat up, and threw away his cigar, and looked at Dr. Morgan with grave intentness.

"Don't you see," he said gently, "that now that my first natural anger has died away, it all becomes more difficult; sadly, bitterly, convinced as I am that there could be no happiness for a man whose wife was capable of deceiving him in the smallest matter? Don't you see that I'm fighting against

my love for her, my desire for her, because of that conviction?"

"Don't call it love," said the doctor, roughly. "Does love not include forgiveness—that you would rather break her heart, sacrifice her whole life, her whole soul, than risk imperilling your own happiness in the smallest degree by finding her a trifle less perfect than you had supposed her to be?"

Sir Harry made a movement of impatience.

"Wait," said the doctor; he leant forward, and lifted a thin hand to emphasise the pleading of his kind hazel eyes, shining with unnatural brightness beneath those drooping wrinkled eyelids. "If you desert her, you *will* kill her soul. Not her body; she will live on, for she is a strong healthy woman. But the better part of her, the part your idealisation of her has roused in her, will die. She will not grow sour or bitter, because she has a beautiful nature, a nature that years of close association with one of the most cowardly, selfish, and despicable of human beings have not spoilt. You know as well as I do that there never was a woman of higher or finer natural instincts; but they are instincts, not principles. She obeyed her natural instincts of gentleness and faithfulness when she devoted herself uncomplainingly to that unspeakable traitor who married her when she was scarcely more than a child. Do you suppose that she acquired her pure virtues from any teaching of his; or from the mother, who knowing what his life and character had been, permitted that marriage? No more than she learnt her breeding from them, or from her cheap school, or from that sharp second-

rate sister-in-law who gives herself as many airs as though she were a parson's wife, while Louise has remained as simple and as unaffected as a princess," said the doctor, vehemently, yet laughing from the very force of his agitation; but Sir Harry uttered no answering laugh. He sat with his glittering eyes fixed on the doctor's face.

"Go on," he said.

"What can I say? You know what her life and training must have been, and you know that, in spite of all, as I have said, that her nature has remained gentle and beautiful, though it is not, and never has been, a strong nature. It has—it must have—the defects of its qualities. It was for *you* to instil hopes and beliefs in the highest possible ideals into that docile mind, so easily influenced for good; melting for love of you, caring only to please you, failing only for fear of you. For you, who have all the strength and truth and courage that she, poor child, may lack; though there is one thing which she will never lack where you, or all the world, are concerned, the one thing wherein you have failed her, miserably."

"What is that?" said Sir Harry, harshly.

"Charity."

"You plead very feelingly for her," said Sir Harry; he breathed hard; into his voice there crept a note of suspicion, of jealousy. "The matter appears to touch you very nearly."

"The question of her happiness touches me very nearly," said the doctor.

"I should be obliged if you would explain," growled Sir Harry.

The doctor met his scowl and gloomy scrutiny

with sorrowful eyes, full of affection and solemnity, and of a sadness he could not help.

"What have you got in your mind?" he said, with a melancholy smile. "I have been a loyal friend to you, Sir Harry, ever since I was old enough to know the meaning of the word friendship. Almost before. And in all the years I have known *her* I have been a loyal friend to her." He hesitated. "I may have thought sometimes what it would be for a man to have such a companion as *she* would be, always by his side, to console, to sympathise, to respond, and above all, to understand; but I never dreamed that a time would come when I should feel impelled to put those thoughts into words. Nor would it ever have come," he shaded his brow with his hand as though the anger in Sir Harry's fiery blue eyes hurt him—"save that I know you will hold them harmless, even sacred—now; since they come from the lips of a dying man."

Sir Harry started; the anger faded instantly from his face; the doctor took his hand from his brow and smiled at him.

"It is quite certain," he said. "Don't mind. I'm ready to go. For a long time past now, above all the other sounds surrounding me, the pleasant sounds of every-day life, I've heard Death knocking at the door."

"What is it?"

"Heart."

Sir Harry appeared stunned.

His mind worked quickly. He recalled several occasions when he had been impatient of the esteem and reverence which Louise had displayed for the

man, who in conjunction with her, had saved his life; he remembered that he had even resented her reliance upon the doctor's friendship and that in the earliest days of their acquaintance he had wished her less charming and submissive in her manner towards his old friend; though he had laughed at himself, reflecting that it was a curious proof of the innate jealousy of human nature, that directly he perceived a person who was charming to him, being charming to somebody else, he should begin to doubt that person's sincerity.

"Does *she* know?" he asked in a low voice.

"She knows, and nobody else here knows," said the doctor, simply. "I persuaded her to come to this valley for no other reason."

His kind eyes, from which the twinkle was never long absent, were humorous still, in spite of their sadness.

"Then you came and took her away—but God knows I did not grudge her to you. It made the thought of death far easier to think of her happiness, and yours," he said.

He paused and added quietly:

"It makes it easier now."

Sir Harry grasped the hand he held out, in silence.

"It 's too late to go to her to-night," said the doctor. "You 'll go—to-morrow."

Then, with a smile, he gave Sir Harry the letter which Louise had written.

When their guests had departed, Lady Cadoc and Gwenllian bade Sir Harry good-night, and went

yawning up the broad staircase in the great hall, to bed; carrying each a silver lantern.

Young Harry lingered, kicking the burning logs upon the hearth into place.

"Don't trouble about the fire, my boy," said his uncle, "unless you're going to sit up. I sha'n't be sorry to get to bed after my journey."

"I don't want to sit up, Uncle, thank you," said young Harry, "but I wanted to say something before I went to bed."

"Well."

Young Harry fidgeted for a moment, and then came closer to his uncle. The firelight could not make his honest face much redder.

Sir Harry grew impatient, knitting his grim brows together, and wondering if his nephew had fallen into a scrape; for it was very obvious that young Harry found it difficult to speak.

"Go on, old fellow," he said at last, roughly but not unkindly, and he put his mighty hand on young Harry's shoulder and gave him a friendly shake. "I've been young myself, you know. I won't be hard on you, since you've been honest with me."

"I've always been honest with you," said young Harry, "but I'm not perfectly certain whether you'll think I've played the game this time. Anyway I should feel more comfortable if I told you. I—I've made a fool of myself while you were away, Uncle."

"So I suppose."

"Not the kind of fool you suppose. Not money or anything of that sort; as it was last time I made a fool of myself."

Sir Harry uttered a short laugh.

"It's this; I—I asked Mrs. Owen to marry me," said young Harry.

"The devil you did," said Sir Harry. He was almost too surprised to be angry; but he betrayed no further inclination to laughter; which was in itself a relief to young Harry, who dreaded ridicule, especially from his uncle, almost more than anything else in the world.

"I did it," he said, speaking very fast and recklessly now that he had once begun, "because I knew that she was lonely and unhappy since her engagement to you had been broken off, and because I loved her, and because——"

"Had she ever given you the slightest reason to suppose she returned your affection?" said Sir Harry.

"Never," said young Harry, quickly. He flushed yet more deeply, set his teeth, and went on. His dogged honesty would not permit concealment of a single motive. "I never was fool enough to think for a moment that—that she could care for me for myself; but I thought—I thought—I was perhaps unconsciously persuaded to think that she might be induced to accept me for other reasons."

"Because you are my heir," said Sir Harry quietly.

"It sounds too beastly for words when you put it like that, sir," muttered young Harry, shamefacedly, "but yes—I meant that if I did n't say it."

"How little you know her," said Sir Harry, almost in musing tones. He looked down upon his nephew, who stood resting his foot upon the stone fender, staring down into the white-hot heart of the log-fire. "What made you tell me, old boy?"

His gentleness surprised Harry greatly, who knew his uncle's impetuous temper, and had expected a burst of indignation at his presumption.

"Partly—it's been on my conscience that I oughtn't to have done it without a word to you—as man to man," he said proudly, and Sir Harry bit the ends of his grizzled moustache lest he should laugh, for he saw that young Harry was fighting with a very different kind of emotion. "And partly I—I felt that I didn't care much what you thought of me, if my telling you would do any good to her. I don't know what sent you away but I know you were angry, and she said she'd given you just cause for anger, which I don't believe—" the one pair of fiery blue eyes met the other—"but whatever it was, I know one thing, she—she cares for nobody but you in this whole world; and whatever you did, or said, or thought, she'll go on caring for you to the end of her life, and no other man will ever be anything to her, for she told me so with her own lips. And I believe her word against anybody and anything in the world. But I was n't sure—" he choked back a sob, "whether you knew it. A woman can't always speak out, when a man can, and so I made up my mind for—for her sake, to tell you. That's all. Good-night."

"Good-night, my Harry boy, and God bless you," said Sir Harry, and there was a note of tenderness in his voice which young Harry had not heard since he was a little boy; neither had his uncle uttered those familiar words of endearment and blessing since that time; which seemed so far away to the young man, and to Sir Harry but as yesterday.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE cottage where Louise lay sleeping was still wrapt in the white mists of early morning, when a hurried trembling messenger was sent to summon her to Brach-y-Gwynt.

Dr. Morgan had died in the night.

His man had taken him an early cup of tea as usual; and had found him dead; calm, and peaceful. There was no sign of any pain or apprehension suffered. A man on horseback had been instantly despatched for a doctor, who had already seen him, and who said that life had been extinct for some hours, and that he must have passed quietly away in his sleep.

A more merciful ending could hardly have been wished, and Louise, hurrying back with the messenger through the damp chill air of the early morning, stunned and horrified as she was—yet was conscious also of a passionate gratitude that he had died without pain, without consciousness, this good man, whose life had been passed in the service of others, who had been so calmly waiting, so ready to obey the inevitable summons.

She was taken at once to his room, seeing only his daughter, who was almost a stranger to her, on her way through the house.

Mrs. Avery was waiting for her, hovering on the

landing; it seemed to Louise that she looked at her curiously, in the midst of her natural grief.

"My mother said you would see that all was as it should be—in there," she said, in subdued, awe-stricken tones, with a hasty gesture that indicated the door of the chamber which Death had entered so recently. "She wished you to be sent for. She is absolutely prostrate, and can do nothing herself, and I cannot leave her."

Then she went back into her mother's room and closed the door.

The doctor's faithful servant, with tears unnoticed and unrestrained raining down his face, had already discharged the last offices for his master.

Instinctively he recognised the sorrow of a fellow-mourner, silently uncovered the face of the dead, and as silently withdrew until Louise should have time to curb the grief which overcame her.

The kindly humorous mouth had grown grave in death; but the look of peace, of strange solemn content, sometimes visible upon the face of the newly dead, calmed her as she gazed.

All the lines were smoothed away by that chill hand which had been laid upon his tired brow; the waxen eyelids for ever veiled those bright kind hazel eyes; the eagerly parted lips were closed in eternal silence; but the grave intentness, the majestic calm—the absolute peace of the expression—brought almost a shadow of consolation to Louise.

She knelt beside him, unconscious of the passing of time, and that the doctor's servant twice entered the room and twice retired noiselessly, unwilling to disturb her. The third time a strong

scent of flowers made her turn her head. He had brought a great wooden basket filled with blossoms from the hot-houses.

Louise rose and came to him quickly and took them. Silently she aided him, and others who followed him, all and everyone pathetically anxious to render a last service to a beloved master, to beautify the still white chamber.

All that was possible was done, and she was left alone once more. She kissed the folded hands and cold brow, and knelt again beside him, feeling she could not bear to leave him alone, unwatched; thinking of the gentle spirit and whither it might be flown; and wishing, as she wept beside him in her loneliness, that she might have gone with him on that strange, strange journey into the unknown.

The sound of a voice breaking upon the stillness came as a shock, though its accents were hushed.

"Mamma has asked for you," said Mrs. Avery in a formal whisper. "I was afraid you might be gone. How nice you have made the room. She said you would know exactly what to do."

Mrs. Avery was her mother's daughter, and the commonplace was typified in her.

Louise felt once more that a lock of surprise was directed towards her; she became conscious that her face was disfigured and swollen by bitter weeping, and instinctively she lifted her hands to smooth her loosened hair, which had been knotted too hastily to present its usual appearance of beauty and order.

The look said, If I, his daughter, can control my grief, surely a stranger, an outsider, may keep her's within bounds.

For a moment she felt impelled to send a message to Mrs. Morgan to say that she too, was prostrated by the blow, and could not come; but she recollected in time that it is the prerogative of near relations to be overcome; and she turned and followed Mrs. Avery meekly.

No formality proper to the occasion was omitted.

"I will just tell her you are coming," said Mrs. Avery, apologetically, and she entered the room, leaving Louise outside for a moment, while she held a whispered conference with her mother. Louise knew quite as well as though she had been actually present, that the hurried opening and shutting of drawers and cupboards meant that Mrs. Morgan was seeking some garment appropriate and yet becoming, in which to receive her.

When at length she was permitted to enter, the note of commonplace sounded so loudly in her ears that for the moment she became deaf to all else; her sacred grief for the dead retreated into the secret places of her mind, and all further inclination to shed tears vanished as she stooped to kiss her friend.

Yet Mrs. Morgan's grief was sincere, and the terrible shock she had sustained had in reality made her ill; or at least unable to stand without feelings of faintness and sickness to which she was altogether unaccustomed.

The light eyes she lifted to the grave and beautiful face of Louise were drowned with weeping, which burst out afresh as she embraced her friend.

That she had been able to ask for the only black tea-gown she possessed, and that she had draped her disordered hair in a mantilla of old lace, were

but proofs that her lifelong instinct for decoration was strong enough to master her, even during the first moments of her sorrow for the husband whom she loved as deeply as her nature permitted; the husband who had never said an unkind word to her, nor even—oh, far higher test of good temper and good breeding!—an uncomplimentary word to her, during all the thirty years of their married life.

“Agnes says you have made it all so nice, just as *he* would have wished. I knew he would have liked you to do something for him,” she sobbed, clinging to Louise, “and I told her you would know how everything should be just as well as though you were a real nurse. Oh, how dreadful it all is. I can’t realise it. To think that only last night we were driving back all together in the brougham, and he was in such good spirits, laughing and saying that if it were not so late we would call upon you. But it was half-past eleven then, and of course he was only joking, for you would have been in bed for hours, as I told him. And he bade me good-night and God bless me, just as usual.” Tears choked her utterance.

“Mamma, don’t you think you should lie still and not try to talk? You will make yourself ill next,” said her daughter.

Poor Mrs. Morgan lay back on her cushions obediently, but her thin fingers held fast to the hand of Louise; perhaps she felt that she needed the sympathy of that gentle clasp, and was loth to be left to the tender mercies of her child.

“I ordered some soup for her at twelve. Here it is; perhaps you will get her to take it,” said Agnes to Louise, as though Mrs. Morgan were a young

child, or incapacitated by sorrow from understanding the words spoken over her head.

"I will take it, if Louise will have some too," sobbed Mrs. Morgan. "She has been in there so many hours, and she's had nothing. It's not wholesome. Do please, my dear. I can't take it otherwise. I'm not sure I can take it at all."

Louise was touched, and devoting herself to comforting and coaxing, the soup was taken, the room was darkened, and poor Mrs. Morgan, still holding her friend's hand fast, fell asleep.

Exhausted by grief, her daughter's noiseless entry to inquire if Louise would come to luncheon, scarcely roused her.

"It seems so strange that—that meals and everything—must go on just the same," said Agnes, with tears in those rather hard and inquisitive eyes, "but of course they must, and if you can stay with mamma a little longer, I shall be very grateful, for I have the telegrams and letters to write, and inquiries without end to answer. The news seems to have flown all over the place already. Several people have asked to see him,—everyone loved him—I am so glad you made it all so nice."

"Yes, everyone loved him, and I am only too glad to stay and do what I can for her," said Louise, softly, for the doctor's words returned to her, and affected her strangely. "*I liked the thought that you would be at hand to comfort my dear wife.*"

"God bless him, wherever he is," she thought, deeply grateful that it was given to her to carry out the wish of which he had spoken.

The petty selfishness and meanness, the little in-

sincerities, affectations, and disloyalties of a small nature, which were inherent in Mrs. Morgan, had often wearied and oppressed Louise; but since her friend had loved his wife in spite of these defects, whether fully perceiving them or not, Louise felt that she had become, for his sake, also dear to her. She drew the covering more closely about the sleeping woman; and tenderly replaced the lace which had fallen from the disordered hair . . . almost she imagined that humorous gaze bent upon her and the wistful voice of her friend saying, "You will be kind to my poor Mary?"

"I will take care of her," Louise answered in her heart, to the voice which had spoken in her heart. . . .

Agnes was satisfied that her mother was in good hands, and went away; not returning until the afternoon, when tea was brought, and the three took it together in Mrs. Morgan's room.

Louise perceived that the time had come when the mother and daughter could be left alone, and that they would be glad to be together; and she rose and kissed Mrs. Morgan, and took her leave, promising to return on the morrow.

But she gave a look which besought Agnes to accompany her from the room.

"May I come back this evening, and watch by him?" she murmured. "I can't bear to leave him alone. I am used to sitting up all night. I am not afraid of death. May I?"

Mrs. Avery looked startled and distressed and uneasy all in one.

"I—I don't think you ought. I don't think my mother would like it," she said. Then added more

decidedly: "If you would come to-morrow and see her——"

Louise could only submit, feeling sadly that she had no claim to enforce her wish against the wish of his own child. She was now only an outsider, and her affection for the dead man, her constant faithful champion, gave her no rights.

In the eyes of Agnes, or of the world, she could have none, compared with those of his family and kindred.

She could only glance at the closed door and go sorrowfully past it. There was nothing more to be done.

"God bless you, my kindest friend," she thought. "My dearest friend in all the world."

She went on her way home through the garden and orchard.

The long rain had beaten the blossoms from the anemones, but here and there a waxen petal clung disconsolate to its stem.

The hues of autumn were upon the dripping melancholy woods.

The delicate foliage of the silver birch, turned to faintest lemon, hung motionless against a dull grey sky. A great Spanish chestnut bore aloft a most royal burden of green and gold. The apple-trees' gnarled and twisted trunks and tangled branches were flecked with yellow leaves and the few remaining apples, escaping the gardener, hung withering also.

The bracken showed every shade of russet; the wild cherry had become a fairy tree of coral red; the poplar's bright chrome stood boldly forth against the dull evergreen of the ilex. The fading

feathery larch showed mournfully through a fleeting mist of clouds upon the hill-top, which veiled also the burning copper and orange of the beeches. The dead leaves carpeted the sodden earth; the autumn world was chill and damp and sorrowful. She thought of the dead man who had been the owner of the fields and the orchards through which she was passing, and who had loved them, and her heart went forth to him in passionate loyalty.

Sir Harry Gwyn had never seen the interior of the cottage where Louise dwelt. He waited there now, in the little green parlour which she had described.

In the absence of its owner that humble room, scantily furnished, spoke to him. It showed him her favourite books, one or two shabby volumes dear to her heart; her dainty needlework; the loving care she had expended over the arrangement of red brambles, brown foliage, and yellow daisies; of pale autumn roses drooping their heads in bowls of fresh leaves.

Sir Harry heard her steps upon the path and rose from his seat, towering in the low-ceiled room, where his grey head almost touched the centre beam; at the sight of her tear-stained face he uttered a cry of pity and tenderness, and held out his arms, and she went to him at once, like a child, and with a little sob, laid her tired head against his broad shoulder.

"You know?" she whispered.

"Yes. I have been to the house several times. I heard you were there."

"They did not tell me."

"I did not ask them to. I came here and waited. He gave me your letter last night—God bless him—and he asked me to come. I came almost at daybreak."

They both forgot all need of explanation—of forgiveness; for there was no room in his heart nor in her's for any thought but of the rest and relief of being together.

THE END

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